

## Silver Ribbon and Raspberries

Gravel spits from under his paws as he races up the driveway. One jagged pebble flicks backwards and bounces off my shoe, skittering towards the massive trunk of a poplar towering bare-sticked to my right. Up ahead, gilded by the afternoon sun, the gravel drive meanders over the green rise to the house like a silver ribbon slipped from a young girl's hair and left forgotten on the grass.

The dog's panting against the front door when he turns to look at me. Even several steps behind him, breathless and sore-kneed, I know we've found his house. His tail thrashes, the force unbalancing him so his feet shuffle on the pavers, long nails rasping audibly. I frown, thinking of the length of his nails and dirty matted hair. Who buys a purebred dog then neglects it? A cocker spaniel, he had all the trademarks of my favourite breed; wide smiling face, flopped ears and docility. He'd been excessively friendly since I noticed him trotting alongside me up the street.

Reaching the house, I see a wicker basket to the left of the doorstep. It's filled with raspberries, a tattered gardening glove slung on top. A brass bellpull hangs to the right of a pair of decaying French glass doors. The golden-stained wood of the doorframe forms a rotting grid holding rectangular panes of cracked glass. Of the sixteen broken panes, almost all are opaque with grime. Only one pane, slightly above the height of my shoulder, has transparent circular streaks, as though someone had begun cleaning it, then been interrupted.

The spaniel nudges at the doors and, apparently unlatched, they push inwards, opening a few inches. "No. Leave it," I whisper, but the dog pushes his head through. I consider calling through the gap, then relent and tug the bell pull. Hearing no chime

inside, I call out: “Hello!” The spaniel, whether startled by my voice or just impatient to be inside, pushes at the doors with his shoulders and bolts through the widening gap.

“Hello! Sorry!” I call out, not wanting to follow the dog and risk barging in on whoever owned such a neglected animal. “Sorry...the dog. I just...I...I found your dog.” My voice echoes away inside the house. I knock hard on the frame, expecting the mild force to shake the door from its hinges or a pane to fall out and shatter on the pavers.

“What are you doing?” The voice, when it finally answers, comes from behind me. A pleasant-looking but serious man of about fifty stands at the top of the drive and I wonder that I didn’t hear his shoes on the gravel. He’s wearing a suit and looks as though he’s come from an important office somewhere, a polished European-looking car parked a few metres behind him under the poplar.

“Your dog...I found...do you have a cocker spaniel?”

“Charlie?” he asks and I see something contract about his facial muscles.

“He ran through the doors. I didn’t want to just -” I indicate the doors.

“It’s fine,” the man says. “You go in.”

My feet don’t want to rise on the step and I feel as though somehow the decomposing house is sucking my energy out through the soles of my feet and using it to peel away more paint and crumble the woodwork.

Seeing my reluctance, the man throws out a hand and helps me into the house. I sense his impatience and cringe, thankful his hand drops away the moment I’m inside.

“Would you like tea?” he calls over his shoulder, striding down the central hallway of the house.

“Please,” I say, noting the dimly lit, stained walls. Tea would help. “Is he,

Charlie, is he your dog?"

"No."

"But, this is your house?"

"No," he repeats, continuing down the hall.

"But? The owner?"

Having reached the entrance to a room, he stops. "It's fine. I -" his voice drops away for a moment, "I know the owner," he assures me then stands back so I can enter.

Inside, I see the room is a small living area filled with old newspapers and musty stuffed lounge chairs. Charlie occupies a faded rose pink chair, one ear flopped over the arm. The walls appear bare apart from a myriad of empty picture hooks stabbed into the plaster. On the floor underneath each hook leans a framed picture, each one turned to face the wall so only the wired backs of the frames are visible.

I point to the turned pictures. "Are they -? Is the owner, moving out?"

"No." he says then pauses, seeming to debate something internally. "She, the owner, will be here soon." He follows with a decisive nod.

The owner will be here soon. I find a chair next to Charlie and sit. The man looks at the dog, then me and continues to hesitate at the threshold of the room.

"I have to go. I've got a meeting in town. Soon. I'll put the kettle on as I go. Just help yourself when it boils. Careful with the kettle, it's heavier than it looks. I'll leave a cup and tea bag out for you."

"Are you sure it's ok? Staying here? Without you? I really don't feel -"

"It's fine. She'll be here. Soon." He turns the wristband of his watch.

"Don't worry about the tea," I say. "Really. You're late. I'm fine"

He hesitates again at the doorway. “When you see her, could you tell her I called and remind her I’ll be back again tomorrow? She doesn’t remember like she used to.”

I nod but he doesn’t see it. He’s turned away. Then he’s gone, the room suddenly darker and quieter. Charlie’s fallen asleep, his snuffling breath loud against the walls.

Then I see it. One frame left hanging on the wall over the fireplace. The pewter frame is a mass of flowers and swirls, the engraving of the ornate details tarnished darker than the rest of metal. Bordered within is a woman, silver hair trailing onto her shoulders. The furrows drawn from the edge of her nostrils to the corners of her mouth are deeply shadowed. Partly visible beneath her hair, the sagging skin of her forehead is pleated, brown and yellow patches roughening the surface. As I look closer her gaze appears more hostile. I stand back, taking refuge behind Charlie’s chair. It’s a strange kind of portrait, the type where the subject seems to turn with you, holding your gaze no matter where you stand in the room. Even now she appears to move again.

There’s a smell. A burning, sweet kind of smell. I follow the scent down the hall, peering into rooms as I go. Reaching the end of the hall, I open a door. In the kitchen the smell is intense, sickly, like a burnt fruit cake, or charred raisins. The benches and kitchen table are covered in hundreds of empty glass jars, the lids mounded in the sink. On the stovetop, a blue gas flame flickers under a massive saucepan. At my feet, there’s an empty wicker basket.

I hope the owner will be home soon. There’s a pot of raspberry jam burning on the stove and I really don’t remember...I really don’t remember how to make the burning stop.