

A sample story from 'Rattling the Cage'

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Messages from the Steppes

Cora is ill. She fears that she might die. The toothbrush that she stuck down her throat lies at her feet, abandoned among dog hairs and crumbs. It belongs to her husband. In her anxiety she snatched it from the rack in the bathroom, without looking. Her fingers were too fat to reach the back of her gullet. The bristles have scraped her throat, leaving it raw. If her husband were suddenly to return from town he would be cross to find his toothbrush on the floor. She would never tell him where it had been. Another little deception to add to a long list.

Illogically she blames the bird. This is the third day that it has been at the window, fluttering outside, pecking at the glass. Challenging her as if she had killed 'Cock-Robin'. Such a pretty bird should not frighten her. Its magnificent breast, a dazzling pink that grins from its chest as if it were advertising the latest lipstick, is thrust at the window time and time again. Mother Nature must have been off-colour that day, thinks Cora, as she reaches for the basin. The vomit is a thin stream of green slime, nothing solid in it. Should it not have goblets of toast, tainted with orange shreds? There were seeds in the marmalade – where had they gone? She does not feel like trawling through it.

The bird flies again at the window, this time so violently that it

collides with the glass. It falls into the terracotta pot that holds the rose that she pruned so savagely last week. Against the black thorns, its pink breast heaves almost as fast as her own pulse. If she were feeling well enough she would go out and strangle it. Dear little things, birdies. People write poems, sing songs about them.

A belch brings up a stringy squiggle. Cora imagines it is a sliver of tapeworm that has been hooked up in her gut. The contents of her stomach are in a state of indecision, whether they should go up or down. She pushes her head lower, into the basin, to encourage an upward route. This time nothing but spittle.

She wishes her husband was here. He would know what to do. He is good in illness. He had been so eager to be off to town. The excuse: to purchase a pair of owls, just like the ones he has on his boat. "They'll fix that damned bird."

These owls, their eyes like lightning in a bottle, wing from the crosstrees in giddying pirouettes, mesmerising the landlubbers. When Cora had pointed out that a pair of sea swallows had nested under their malevolent gaze, in the luff of the sail, he had gone off in a huff, saying, "I may be gone sometime."

Well, she might be gone for a lot longer if she continued to feel like this, though she had to admit the pain had eased. Her legs were numb and cold to touch, yet beads of sweat, gathering round her nose, slid down towards her neck. She mopped them up with the wet cloth impregnated with eau-de-cologne.

Arnold had warned her against eating it.

"Don't touch it. There are more mad women in the north of the state – it's the in-breeding, you know – than sperm in a healthy male ejaculation."

She had been shocked. Arnold was losing all his inhibitions.

He had been so modest as a young man, wearing two pairs of underpants in case he had some sort of accident. Now he strode about naked, pulling weeds out, with his bony bottom high in the air. Thank God the only neighbour was the farm. She could not trust him to behave with his former decorum. Something had happened the last time he was in town. He had come home agitated. "Had an altercation. Police involved – only in the most oblique way."

Cora had shushed him, as he had arrived at the high point of the quiz-show when the competitor might march off with a million dollars. She tried to recall what he had said. A woman – yes, that was it – she had said something about Hitler being in Liverpool. An argument had ensued on the bus. Police called. Now it all sounded so unlikely that she felt that she must have dreamt it. Arnold had a temper and hated to be wrong. Sometimes she noticed that he stood too close to people. Like a big dog, longing to lick faces. Had he taken his tablets? He was always more amenable when he took them.

The bird was sitting on the rim of the pot, pecking at its breast, to clean away the dirt from the fall. It looked less vibrant, almost defeated. Perhaps it had flown from Siberia, lost its mate over the Steppes – a jumbo sucked it up in its jet stream. Now it was here, disorientated and suffering from post-traumatic stress. She had read about that; seemingly it was a common modern malady. That would account for its erratic behaviour. Its feathers, tinged with black, drooped. But its eye caught hers in a defiant stare.

Cora's stomach wobbles like a jelly fish as another spasm crosses it. Why did she eat the wretched stuff? Arnold was right.

"That woman could be a serial killer. Damned clever. Sees a stranger and foists some home-made goody on her. Jam one day, fudge the next."

"Rubbish," she had said. "She was kindness itself."

The touch of her hand on Cora's shoulder had been light, almost a caress. At first Cora had thought it was someone fussing about the dogs using the nature strip. She had turned to see a woman, about her own age, extending her hand.

"Some marmalade – I'm giving it away."

The glass had been so cold to touch that Cora had flinched.

"It's been in the fridge."

Before she could thank her properly, the woman was gone, the loose oriental trousers flapping around her ankles. Her long hair, loosened from its bun, spun in the breeze that had come from nowhere. Cora watched her cross the road and enter a house, with a neat hedge and trees, further up the street. A loud bang from a door made Cora jump. She stood with the jar in her one hand and the dogs' leads in the other, wondering if she should note the address and send her a thank-you note.

Arnold had wanted to put it in the first dustbin they came to.

"No, no – her husband might be the garbage man. How awful – such humiliation."

The woman had looked harmless. She had been not untidy exactly. Sloppy. Her long hair could be a nuisance bent over the jampot. She had not worn spectacles. Cora could not decide whether this was a plus factor in the making of marmalade. The contents of the jar were opaque, a dull gold colour, solid-looking, sugary at the bottom. Cora had hidden it from Arnold, at the back of the fridge, until this morning.

When Arnold had gone off in such a huff she felt defiant, rebellious. The marmalade spread across the toast looked just like the product she bought from the supermarket. The cramping pains, the nausea, the headache had come shortly afterwards. At first she refused to believe it could be the marmalade. A coincidence. As the pains grew worse, her pulse shot up and her

eyes could not focus properly. She saw the house again, the privet hedge, a few rhododendrons, a laburnum tree – all poisonous. Arnold was right – death at the hands of a serial killer.

The toothbrush did its work wonderfully well. She would not need to call an ambulance.

On the table there is some cold tea, left in the pot. She must drink, take in fluid. At the bottom of her cup are a few tea leaves. Through unfocused eyes Cora can see the seeds of life. She will not die. Back to doing ordinary things, like reading her book. It will lessen her paranoia. She has arrived at the point where Edwina Mountbatten had set off with a friend in her Hispano Suiza to look for her children. She has sent them off with Nanny for the mountain air in Hungary but she could not quite remember where. 'Not to worry,' says the intrepid Edwina. 'I'll find them.'

Cora's mind can't take this in. It does seem rather careless to mislay your children. Her own children are grown up. She was less than perfect as a mother, but she always knew where they were.

Cora's stomach has gone from a washing machine tumble to a tightness that is equally unpleasant. As she massages it she hears soft rumblings that are in time with the bird's pecking on the glass. It must want something. Three days are a long time just to hang about outside a window. Reincarnation – is that the missing clue? Lily, her friend who had died recently, had believed in it. She had died alone. Cora had wanted to visit her. Arnold had persuaded her that it was better to remember her as she had been. Cora sent her diaphanous nighties, frothed with lace, that she could not wear because of the scars; handmade chocolates that she could not eat because of the nausea; platitudes that offered no comfort when Lily whispered down the phone, "I am so afraid."

The bird had the same cheeky eye as Lily. She would let the bird into the house. Cora struggles up from the couch. Her bare feet, splayed out to give more balance, are a dirty grey. She looks at them in dismay. "What would the ambulance men say? Dirty old woman!"

Cora flattens her nose against the glass. "Are you Lily?" The bird flies to the roof, spreading its wings in an elegant arc. Lily was clumsy, always breaking crockery, colliding with passers-by, knocking over small children. She knew that she was rough, claiming her ineptitude had arisen after she had been visited by a UFO. The aliens had done something to her, altering her eye and hand coordination. Cora had known Lily from schooldays when she was always in trouble for ink splotches and dirty marks on her sewing. No, this pernickity little bird could not be Lily. She would choose to come back as something more lumbering – a sloth perhaps?

Was the bird then a harbinger of doom, a prophet for the 'end times'? She, Cora Bennett, has been chosen to relay its message to the world. Hardly likely. Even her own family did not take her seriously.

Family? That was it. She must warn the twins, Jonathon and Davida, whom she knows will sneer at her for believing that a silly little bird, fluttering at her window, could possibly have any impact on their lives. Jonathon is a judge, the youngest ever in the history of the judicial system. Davida is the first woman to be head of a stockbroking firm.

Cora must do her duty by them and try to phone them. Anticipating that she will be unable to speak directly to them, she must think of something of enough portent to warn them. Their associates are always polite, but hardly cooperative. 'Beware the Ides of March' was too cryptic for Caesar; she must be more explicit. What is she to say?

The bird is doing acrobatics, more coordinated than it was. One minute it clings to the metal edge of the window, its tiny claws bent at a very sharp angle; next it flies upward like a shooting star; and then it spirals downwards in a death-defying curve, just missing the terracotta pot. It reminds her in some peculiar way of herself at ten doing the sword dance. Her phenomenal leaps impressed the judges and by some miracle she landed on the allotted squares, the swords unshaken.

The phone rings. Halfway towards it, supporting her still tender stomach with her hands, Cora has to rest. The room swings into action. The breakfast dishes jump. The walls shudder. The floor is a turntable. The dogs yelp. It is an earth tremor, a frequent happening in this area. Is this the big one that Arnold has been predicting for years, and the bird has been trying to warn her of it? Why did it not make its message clearer? Cora, stranded in the middle of the floor, is forced to squat down and put her hands on top of her head to protect herself from the falling ceiling. No pieces of plaster shower her. The dogs come out from under the table and lick her feet. Everything returns to normal. With a struggle Cora manages to stand up. She ought to be grateful that it was not an earthquake.

"That bird is very irritating."

The phone rings again. She sways towards it, breathless.

"Did the earth move for you?" she asks.

"This is the police. We don't want any of that talk, Madam. We have a gentleman here, a Mr Arnold Bennett who claims to know you."

"What's he done?"

"Been a bit of a nuisance. Telling obscene jokes to ladies in the supermarket."

"The Arnold I know doesn't know any dirty jokes and hardly

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any clean ones. Oh yes, except one he tells at Christmas about Paddy, who has heard that toilet water behind the ears attracts the ladies, and sticks his head in the toilet bowl."

"Madam, do you know this Arnold Bennett?"

"I thought I did, but now I'm sure I don't. He is a stranger to me."

"But Madam, he says he is your husband."

"You'd better get in touch with Judge Bennett – he knows him very well. They used to play cricket together."

"I know Judge Bennett. Thank you – I'll get in touch."

Cora takes to the couch again. She should have asked whether the gentleman had a parcel of owls. So Arnold has become a dirty old man. It must be liberating for him, to throw away his inhibitions abroad as well as at home. Was Arnold the cause of the bird's sojourn at their window?

It hardly seems worth the effort. Since there will be no owls to remedy the situation, when she is feeling completely well she will go down to the farm and borrow their cats, Midge and Madge. The dogs can be locked up so that the cats can have freedom to stalk their prey, eye and paw working together. The extended claw, closing over the feathered body, will be the most tender moment of all. David Attenborough and Walt Disney enjoy the drama of death in the wild. Why shouldn't she savour it outside her window. Her pleasure will be smaller – the reality no less thrilling.

Tomorrow she will make a chocolate steam pudding, sauced with slightly sugary marmalade, for father and son. They will welcome some home-cooking after a trying day. She won't have any.