

Brenda Riches / THE BREEDING GROUND

He fell asleep with his head resting on the table, his arms spreadeagled over it. Perhaps it was the hardness of the wood that gave him awkward dreams, each one stumbling into the next till he found himself blundering through a scorched forest towards a distant woman who smiled and turned into Ruth when he came close. Her smile contained a promise of damnation.

When he awoke at last, all he could do at first was open his eyes and let the light from the window persuade him that he had left Ruth behind for the time being. He needed a cup of tea.

As he walked to the kitchen, it seemed that he was somewhere high above himself looking down at this dishevelled person going from a table to a kettle and taking endless time to get there. The more he thought about it, the more the distance stretched, reminding him yet again that Ruth was somewhere else in an unreachable place. The cold kettle was a shock that brought him back down into himself. A cup of tea to console him. Was it too much to ask for? But he didn't plug the kettle in. Nothing boiled.

He sat down at the table and pounded his rage into its sticky surface, pounded so hard that crumbs bounced and rolled off down into the carpet.

The carpet was a world of bright blue, long-tailed birds and sturdy trees. Between the trunks magenta rivers meandered. Now that Ruth was gone, he was doomed to travel alone, hour after hour, till the line that divided his nights and days grew thinner the way a sunbeam grows thinner when the crack between curtains narrows as they are being drawn closed, locking a room into darkness.

When his tantrum was over, he went to the store, taking with him the orange plastic bag he had bought for its capacity and strength.

Where in the name of all that was worthy did they hide the teabags in this godforsaken store? He tried to read the signs over the aisles, but the letters fidgeted on the boards and changed places with each other. The more he peered up at them — having to crane his neck, they were so high — the more shoppers jostled him and knocked their wagons against his shins. No one said sorry, and when he tried to tell them to look where they were going, they stared past him and trundled away.

He asked a girl in a white smock where the tea was and she told him aisle six but he couldn't distinguish the numbers and the girl's expression stopped him from asking which one that was.

He snatched up items at random and hurried back to his house.

It took him a while to cross the carpet because a violent storm blew up and he had a tortuous time negotiating the rapids. The water was thrown into high pink waves that hid the rocks and changed the shoreline. Soaked through and exhausted, he went into the kitchen and unpacked the shopping bag. He emptied the fridge of sour milk, mouldering bread, brown-edged lettuce, and meat that had turned blue in places, then put in the fresh replacements. The garbage bag was now full. He took it outside.

Glancing down the street, he noticed there were no other cans at the curb and the garbage truck was disappearing around the corner. Time was such, that a small lapse in a schedule could tilt a universe. The garbage would have to wait a week. Why had Ruth left him to this muddle and mess?

On his way back to the house, he picked up his mail. One letter. An invitation from Ruth to an eight-day celebration of her "new-found freedom." He would accept, of course, because he had no choice.

The cypress on her lawn bowed as he passed, and the climbing rose over her lintel bent to snag him when she opened the front door to let him in. Her livingroom was so airless, he asked her to open the latticed window. She did so, lamenting the brief loss of her leaded barrier to the world.

"Help yourself to a drink," she said. He mixed a martini, glad to have something to fortify himself against her soft profile at the window. The cypress was a charred shape behind her against a sun setting in a clutter of orange cloud.

He was relieved when other guests started to arrive. She greeted each one lasciviously, relatives and friends alike, yet he soon perceived that they felt no more at ease than he did. A lank-haired man who spent much of his time leaning against the bar looked as if he were seeking something he would more likely find under a stone. A plump redhead in a diaphanous blouse, who hovered near the stereo taking charge of the music, might have felt more at home in a glass bowl. She seemed to be swimming inside the confines of a vacuousness. Even though she had an adoring man at her side, she was patently turning a deaf ear to his ardour and chose instead to fix her glassy gaze on the place where Ruth's Van Gogh used to hang. The memory sent him to refill his glass.

By the time he was on his fourth martini, a joint was being passed from mouth to mouth. Leaning against the wall, he observed the chain of lips being clamped to the weed, listened to the sussuration of sucking and exhaling. When his turn came, he inhaled deeply, taking the smoke into his lungs and holding it there. He had heard this was how it was done. The goldfish turned off the music to create a silence that would "help them to hear their deeper selves." A girl with spiky yellow hair felt moved by her deeper self to take off her skirt, revealing slack, pale thighs. Soon others followed suit, and the chairs, bar and couches were draped with garments, obliging him to wonder why people felt the need to reveal in public what was best left to the imagination. Ruth was nowhere to be seen. Her absence tugged at him. He got himself another drink.

When a desolate blonde with aimless eyes took a mirror from the wall and laid it on the floor, he feared he was in for a bout of narcissism. But all she did was kneel back while her escort laid out avenues of white powder on the glass with the help of a razor blade, and urged the company to sniff the stuff up through a rolled up dollar bill. When it was handed to him, he bent over the mirror. The sight of his haggard face was repellent. He closed his eyes, and sniffed till his nostrils seemed to catch fire. By the time the blonde had reached that stage of delirium where hands flutter and legs seem moulded from rubber, he decided to go and look for Ruth.

The first room was small with a narrow bed in one corner, visible because of the light from the hallway. The room's switch didn't work and the night was so close, he had the sense of a bat pressing its mouth and wings to the window pane. He looked for a candle but found none. Ruth wasn't there. He heard a gentle wailing as of a widow at her husband's burial. It came from the room next door.

This room was brightly lit. There was nothing on the white walls; no furniture; no curtains. Ruth was lying on her back on the wooden floor, her skirt pulled up to the tops of her thighs. Her face was matted with thick powder; a slash of scarlet bled from the edges of her mouth. Less repugnant and more fascinating were the birds that enclosed her in a precise fence, some standing, some lying down. Did live birds lie down? Yet their eyes were open and wings stirred as if preparing for flight. Looking more closely, he saw that they were in fact stuffed, and the movement of the wings came from a gust of wind entering through the open window. Each bird was different: a blackbird with red streaks on its wings, a canary with a thin beak, a large thrush, a plain sparrow. Some of them had clearly come from a tropical forest, though none of them resembled his carpet birds. The saddest was a white parrot.

In the brightness of the room, Ruth was an altogether different person. Someone not to be desired. She didn't seem to notice he was there.

He went back to the party with new interest. When the blonde came up to him and licked his mouth, he succumbed, mingling his breath with hers and sharing the secrets of his tongue. But the sloppy conjunction soon palled and he withdrew to stir another martini.

The goldfish and the bar fixture were avoiding each other's glances, the dancers were taxing their muscles with inane gyrations that connected nothing with nothing, the spectators were filling their lungs with the smoke they then heartily expelled into the congested room. He joined in with a vague sense of glee till he became absorbed in the sight of a young man with hair that might blind the sun, and his wasted companion. When they reached the tedious point of surrender, he turned his gaze to a picture more pleasing because it seemed to be going somewhere: a horse and buggy driven by a stark-faced woman with severe hair and a straight back. She was encased in a prim bodice and skirt. There was no need for a whip; her eyes were enough. The painting held him in its sepia grip while the debris of the party grew: the flopping, pasty bodies, the wriggling of stale desire where couples came together, parted, found other partners. When the wasted girl rubbed her cheek against his arm, he should have been moved to something. She was, after all, quite appealing. But he had witnessed and taken part in too much that was blatant.

Time rearranged itself in its passage from darkness to light. He slept in daylight; in the space between dusk and dawn he drank and watched. As the night deepened, he foraged in cupboards, managing to eat enough to sustain him. He wandered the rooms of Ruth's house, entering into the disarray that faced him at every turn, losing himself in the powder that saturated his nostrils, the folds of flesh, the tangles of hair, the glasses filled and refilled, the joints rolled and smoked. He broke off his own affair with the gin and satisfied a subsequent craving with large tumblers of apple juice he found in a box under the kitchen table.

On the last morning came a clap of thunder, and Ruth declared the party over. As the guests went their ways from the same door amidst the nauseating expressions of gratitude from those who were still able to speak, he knew finally that Ruth was utterly nothing to him. She might just as well not have happened.

He drove through a lightning storm back to his house.

The garbage bag had a hole in it, doubtless chewed by a scavenging cat. From the hole oozed something dark brown. Flies couldn't keep away; when he lifted the bag, they buzzed. The bottom of the can was squirming with soft white grubs. The stench was sickening.

He went inside, filled the kettle and plugged it in. He took out the teabags and teapot, then watched the garbage can through the window. He felt maggots behind his eyes. The kettle was taking a long time to boil, leaving him space to imagine. He was tempted to unplug it, but knew that only water that had boiled would guarantee death. He touched the kettle. It was stone cold. He flipped a light switch. No light came on. It was lucky he had a gas stove. He filled another kettle. The gas jet came to life with a soft explosion.

He hated to stand and wait for a kettle to boil, so he went to his bedroom to unpack, putting the clean clothes into cupboards and drawers where they belonged, and the dirty ones into a plastic bag, laundry he would deal with after he had dealt with the mess outside. The plastic bag looked like a green shadow.

The kettle was boiling. He poured some of the water into the teapot. When he emptied the rest over the new bodies of possible flies, most of them stopped moving. The rest would too, soon enough. The sun was a dull pink circle behind the trees.

Milk for his tea. But the light in the fridge didn't go on. Was it too much to hope that the milk had survived? He poured some into his tea. The surface curdled.

He filled a glass with cold water and carried it to the bedroom to sip in peace. Sunset was replaced by dusk. Touching the cool glass to his forehead, he saw divisions, lines keeping thing from thing: the fold of a curtain holding a rose apart from its stem, seams in wallpaper breaking the true dimension of stripes. Even the mirror in which he watched his fading self made in the wall a niche that wasn't there. The clock's hands didn't move.

The gentle rim on his lips reminded him that substance is rarely apparent, and in that rareness lies what is. He drank, sensing the wriggle of liquid worm its way down, while the day reached an edge fine as honed pain, a thin brink of blackness.