THE ROUGH AND THE PLEASANT

Tara Gould

The fog lifted that day and Alice left the house to dance.

It had stuck around for what seemed like an age, filling all the spaces from pavement slab to chimney pot and as the days passed it sank lower, like stock, reducing and becoming denser. Alice had pressed her nose to the window, while her legs jittered with a restless agitation, watching and waiting. She counted the hours in each one of the eleven days and between being called to help her mother with cleaning and kneading and minding little Anna she checked on the progress of the smog.

On day six gentlemen's top hats appeared, bobbing, and skirting the walls. Day seven revealed their well-fed faces and pink shiny cheeks. Day eight exposed the men in bowlers hurrying to offices, and on the ninth day the merchants' faces appeared, crowding between shops or waiting for custom, confident and hopeful, or serious with business. The tenth day revealed the flat caps of working men. They skimmed the top of the soup, moving jerkily, swiftly, and also ladies' hair, matt brown, piled high and fixed with wide hats that came floating by like strange boats on a murky sea. The pale grey faces and hollowed eyes of the out-of-work men and boys searching for something – food, drink, a job – came last. By the end of the tenth day the fog reluctantly curled its way from under barrows and between horses legs. It remained beneath low bridges and nuzzled into the dark L shaped alleys and dirty pockets of the city, blanketing the dead whose final struggle it had dignified with privacy. On the eleventh day, they talked about the old man and the young boy who had been revealed, killed by cold or hunger or both, shoeless and blue lipped, hard as stone, clinging to each other.

It was the afternoon of the eleventh day that Alice's mother, Mrs Rebecca Boninsegni appeared in her doorway with a pale blue blanket over her forearm.

While her daughter danced in the street, she stared up at the miracle of blue sky, which was merely a palm shaped patch, and wiped the sweat from her wide brow.

She had been at work for hours. She had swept and dusted the soot from the floors and scrubbed the lino for the fourth time. Then, with a woollen blanket held up before her as a sail, she had caught the last yellow ribbons of smog from her hallway and driven them onto the street, where she watched them sashay up to the soiled pink skyline. Here, the sun could be seen, throbbing hard through the mist, and she let the dull sphere right into her eyes and it seemed to trigger the first dreadful wringing in her thighs and her bowels.

'Alice!' she called, 'It's starting!'

Alice was twirling and leaping to the organ grinder's jaunty tune and she paused and turned, remote and precise as a reptile, 'Oh mother, can't it wait. I ain't got time.'

Because after the days of fog, the clear air had attracted the biggest crowd she'd ever had and even though her pinafore was grimy and her boots were too big, she danced beautifully, with a careless rapture.

A small weasel-like boy who had been watching the show saw his chance to earn himself a shilling. He turned and ran swiftly and barefooted from Shoreditch to Bethnal Green until he reached the road lined with bird stores. Thousands of caged and coloured finches charmed the soot-stained spaces with their song. At the centre of this avian colony the largest shop sold only linnets, mounted one above the other upon the brick surface, a sheer wall of square cages, high and oppressive as a cliff side. It threw a shadow onto the curb where a wry and dismal man, Alice's father, Jack Boninsegni, sat in a deck chair. He was looking down at a small brown and grey bird that he held in his hands. Crimson dappled the bird's head feathers, bright against the man's dark, leathered skin.

‘Your misses has started the baby!’ said the boy, his expression both tragic and keen.

‘Is Angel there?’ asked Jack without looking up.

‘Yes and your Alice!’

‘Then I’ll stay put,’ he said, and he scrunched his face and lifted the bird to it, nuzzled it, as if to say a silent, anxious prayer into the feathers which fanned out around his pitted nose. He pulled a coin from his pocket, asked the boy to return when it was done.

They called her Angel because she was the one who, for as long as they could remember, brought the new babies into the world. When the boy returned to Alice he found Angel sitting in the only chair in the kitchen, the bloody child to her own vast breast. He looked the other way, at the portrait of Lord Brougham on the wall, torn from an illustrated magazine, but not because he was ashamed of what he saw, but because of what it meant.

Alice knelt with two small sisters at the side of her dead mother, the pale blue blanket now covered the lifeless form, supine on the linoleum.

Alice looked up, fearsome and wet faced, ‘Earnt your ‘alf a crown di ya! Little profiteer. You will ‘ave when you tell ‘im. He’s just the kind to shoot the messenger is my old man.’

But when the boy returned to bird street he was relieved to find the old man gone. He scanned the wall of bird cages, to where the falling sun lit up the metal of the thin bars, behind which dozens of tiny beaked faces looked out at life. The lower birds were perky and still singing, but in the higher cages some of them were on their sides, panting and pathetic. Others were hard as mechanical toys, on their backs, their feet stuck into the air like miniature crucifixes.

The boy returned to Alice because he'd lost *his* mother last spring, her own cock linnet in its bell cage by her side singing pleasant song all through. Tolic tuck wizey. Tolic e kee quay. Over and over until the end.

By the time he got there the body of Rebecca Boninsegni had already been moved to the bedroom; he could hear Angel in there shuffling and banging, and now Alice sat in the chair, the sleeping baby on her lap, wrapped tightly in the same blue blanket.

'I know where 'ell be,' Alice said to the boy. Her face, no longer wet with tears, was aghast and pale and taut, like something scrubbed clean and affronted. 'There's an 'ome match at the Blue Anchor tonight. E'll have Ruby Heart singin.'

In the saloon bar of a public house on Mile End Road the crowd swelled and swayed, high on drink and blasphemous merriment, their faces bloated or bruised, deepening in hue as old grievance's softened, or were made maudlin by yet another bitter, Johnnie Walker or double gin.

But in the room next door a silent congregation gathered. Poor working men, rough faced and exhausted, filled five rows of wooden chairs and waited – breathless, soundless, as still and obedient as small children. They faced two birds cages hung side by side on the wall. Four grave characters in powdery suits, sporting thick moustaches, sat at a table beneath. One had a pad and a pencil, one held a pocket watch, one was Jack Boninsegni, and the other his opponent, a young, thin, fidgety type. In the centre of the table, two silver columns of twenty shillings had been neatly stacked. Jack's eye flicked between the cage of his champion, Ruby Heart, to the rival, who was perched in a fancy cage, a scarlet ribbon above the bars like a proscenium arch.

The man with the pencil divided his page into two and wrote Rough Song at the top of one section and Pleasant Song at the top of the other.

Then the man with the watch signalled the start of the competition with a finger raised and dropped and the silent audience fixed upon the silent birds, perched in their little theatres. But the birds were in no hurry to perform, and the clean and empty hush stretched on for three, four, five minutes. Finally, the rival bird started in with his lead off. It was only a scratchy chuckle. He began again, then faltered, and Ruby Heart, impatient, led off and launched into half a dozen rounds of flawless pleasant song. The rival joined in and the piping duet overlapped and intermingled in a torrent of ecstatic warbling, so that there seemed to be no end and no beginning, but every man in the room could follow each bird separately, could pick out the rough song from the pleasant, and tallied the score in his head.

Alice and the boy crept in through the back door and found a space where they stood behind the rows of chairs. She held the tiny baby close to her chest, wrapped in the blue blanket, his crown still dotted with dried blood. Ruby Heart was in full flow, Alice looked at the red feathers on his crown. She looked at her father's face, caved in and resigned, but with a glint of pride in his eyes, directed at his singing mascot. A sombre fog descended upon her. She closed her eyes but the sound of the bird song was inescapable, ecstatic and ascending. It seemed to get louder and sharper and more and more urgent. Alice had never seen a meadow apart from in picture books, but she had no trouble imagining one now. There was no fog and there was no baby in her meadow, just an endless stretch of grass to leap and dance through and the air was clean and the bird song came from up in the air somewhere.

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