The Bird Flying Fog

They had been married for fifty years before she felt his hands around her throat. She sat at the dining room table, the yellow green shag and floral wallpaper looking on. Everything around them held still as he throttled and throttled her, except the steam that rose from the vegetables and meat on the table. His plate sat full, his silverware untouched, his chair pushed out askew. Florescent light from the kitchen and nutritious orange incandescence from the lamp behind her commingled on the ceiling and she looked at it.

It didn’t hurt. It had a right to. She looked up at his face. The effigy of the man she loved. He looked like his soul had snuck out the back. He wore a look of confusion, of dismayed senility. His body sagged and teetered these days but those strong rough hands of his still held the vitality of his middle years. His gardener’s hands. His green thumbs hugging her larynx. Her body bounced gently and resolutely against the wicker back of her chair under the sway of those hands. Her bones were more like cartilage these days. Her body was light like a bird’s. She got ready for her flight.

He couldn’t remember why he was shaking her. Something was lost in the last few minutes or the last few years. The foundation gone from under the house. The past was a swamp and the present but once in a while he felt.. He saw her eyes looking up at him, her blue gray If he could just Better not stop, shaking. He remembered her face at twenty, trembling. Their third home that She looked scared and the placid Goddamn Bitch.

Love memories swamp.

She felt her legs disappear first and then her hands. Then his hands went too. All these years of weary, weary, weariness lifting out of her one by one. Years of this house and just keeping him alive, all the while her own time running out. Trying to finish a crossword. Or clean the bathroom, with him there needing her. Michael's shaking hands dropping a box of toothpicks once; that was her soul, toothpicks from a box. Only flying, not falling – her soul was years and years and years, lifting out of her one by by one, small and balsa, until they were gone.

She went slack in his hands

what to do so he just kept shaking

maybe she’ll wake up, he thought, imagine her awake,

shaking her awake

and imagine frost-burnt foliage.

He couldn’t use the phone any more so it wasn’t until Tuesday when Meals on Wheels came that the body was found. He’d tried to tidy the dishes, moving most of them to the kitchen, and a few to the bathroom, muttering.

Sarah Winslow had delivered this route for almost a year now and she was proud of that. She rang the door and he answered it after the long shuffling walk from his easy chair by the television. It was two days gone if he could just remember.

He looked lively this morning. “Good morning, Mr. Cassidy. How are you today?”

He mumbled and fumbled for the word. The tip of his tongue – the idea in a bubble at the front of his brain. He could her face.

“I can’t remember these days,” he said, “If I could the.. name.” His old eyes moistened and his crevassed skin looked thirsty.

“Take your time Mr. Cassidy.”

He stared directly at her for several seconds and finally said, “Dolly.”

“Your daughter! She lives in California doesn’t she?”

“No, uh.” He started weeping. He hadn't the foggiest idea why.

“Can I come inside the house, Mr. Cassidy?” She felt a growing dread. It was a long time for him to hold to one topic. He hesitated, then understood what she wanted, and stepped awkwardly backwards out of the way.

She started forward and then stopped. From where she stood she could see the entirety of the kitchen, which was unusually cluttered, and through the portal beyond, a thin slice of the dining room. Mrs. Cassidy’s hand was visible upturned on the carpet. Her arm was lit by a sunspot and motes wandered above her fingertips.

“Oh lord – Vera!” She nearly upset the old man as she ran past him. Later, she used the telephone. Michael’s eyes had dried and he looked on with an irresolute open mouth.

After a little while he turned his head. He found himself in a yard. He turned his head some more and his body with it. Green lawn. A white door. A fence. He turned back to the direction he had been moving with a vague sense of purpose. Dolly.. Vera. Time to shave.

Vera. He shuffled to a familiar lawn chair and eased himself into it. A woman approached. Vera. She was dressed in white. Where – the army had a... he thought about his past. If the tree. If he could only a bird. A bird in the tree. Time to shave.

“Mr. Cassidy?” Vera. “Mr. Cassidy? I’m your nurse, Elisa. It’s time for your pills. Is it okay if I help you?” Vera.

She didn’t know what to do with this one, exactly, when he didn’t respond. She always had the sense that he was under there, somewhere, with rushing, inexpressible memory. Like a river ran beneath him. It was almost painful to interrupt his reverie. He killed his wife, you know. Then he did the dishes for her.

“Mr. Cassidy, I have your pills. It's time to take them. I’m your nurse, Elisa.”

He slowly turned his head up to face her but his eyes stayed focused on a bird in the tree by the fence. “You see,” he said, “I’m there. That’s, if.” There was a long pause. “I can’t remember these days. If…” his words gave way to a long slow humming grumble.

“Yes?” She was transfixed. In response to her question he looked foggily up at her and locked onto her eyes. He perched on her pupils like a seabird. He watched the water for fish. His eyes were dry and yellowed. He thought very carefully.

“It’s so, alone.” All she could do was offer him the little plastic cup with its tumbling pharmaceuticals. He looked relieved; he’d forgotten his thought. He took the cup in his shaking hand and remembered what to do with it. He took the pills in his mouth then took the identical little cup of water from her and drank it down.

“You miss your wife don’t you Mr. Cassidy? You miss your wife, Vera.” Elisa said, watching the minutiae of his face.

“Oh, umm.” He couldn’t recall. “I remember these days.”

The bird leapt from the tree and several months went by for Michael Cassidy.

One day he walked past the game room, slowly, cautiously. He was aware his frailty. He wore diapers now they helped him with. When he reached an open doorway, he stopped, transfixed by the sudden sunlight. He stepped outside. On either side of the doorway, rhododendrons bloomed. He smiled his weak old smile and started to bend over to smell them. All around the yard attendants like rabbits poked up their heads worried for a fall. After he had expended his three or so inches of flexibility and balance he stopped his descent and breathed in deeply. A zephyr memory of green scratched at his palms. For a moment mud and chlorophyll seeped the knees of his jeans.

He straightened up and began slowly forward, as always, with the sense of a mission. He stopped again. Something had caught his eye. He turned his head to the right. A cat stood stalk still staring at him. It was morbid white with long hair and unworldly green eyes. It looked nervous and immortal and potent.

Cat. He could remember: cat. His rhododendron smile was back. His eyes hid themselves in wrinkles. “She’ll come her, Pusscat!” In his excitement, a string of incoherent vowels and stuttered consonants escaped him; scraps of words. Then, “Kit, cat.” The cat loosened up. It walked slowly and easily toward him. It was already purring, and, like a cat, it rubbed against his pant legs. “Kit,” he said.

The cat just waited now.

Michael forgot about his new friend and moved in the direction that suited him best – towards his chair. The staff continued to watch him and to watch the cat. It followed him like a familiar.

He rediscovered its presence when it jumped into his lap. He looked down at it, into its eyes, which looked also into his. A slight breeze sweet with pollen blew through the trees beyond the bushes. While he stared vacantly at the cat on his lap a bird chirped in the distance. The cat turned its head. He continued to stare at it just as before. Breath passed rhythmically through his old man nostrils and the cat's. A wind chime made its presence known and its endless mindless melody merged with the moment, on and on and on.

All of a sudden the cat leapt from his lap, bounded across the yard, leapt seamlessly to the top of the red board fence, and without hesitation it was gone. The attendants relaxed and returned to their duties. Over several minutes Michael Cassidy’s chin fell to his chest. A bird sang ceaselessly from the bushes and the long fog finally parted.