

## The Sparrow

By Alex Clark-McGlenn

When I wrote these pages in June my health was sparse and though I have improved, these are the last pages I shall write, these are the pages that will end my life.

I am sick. The intense pain I have experienced for countless days have been beyond comprehension, only if experienced can one truly understand. Many physicians have seen to my body. All have told me there is no remedy for my symptoms, no cure to my ailment. For days I have laid, confined to this room and chained with weakness to my bed.

Even as I write I can feel the strength ebb from my once strong muscles, my once strong mind. I know longer recall who I am, nor do I recognize the many visitors who, unknown and unbeknownst to my dim mind come to my sickbed.

“All things pass sir, and as bad as thing might be, I know you are strong Mr. Drewliner sir, strong willed.”

How I recall word for word the conversations that transpire around me, I cannot explain. Though I have been deemed by my caregivers as Mr. Drewliner, I cannot extrapolate what Mr. Drewliner—what I—might have done to be awarded such regal treatment upon my deathbed.

Each day I wake and spend my morning peering through the glass doors that lead to the balcony. An assortment of birds come to my window to play and sing in the spring morning. I often times pretend that they come for my amusement, to comfort me and console me on the lessons of death. For without my sheltered room and within the wilderness their lives have always been one of survival, much like mine has become.

“Hello there Sir, Mr. Drewliner, Sir,” the squat care woman interrupts my reverie every morning without fail.

“And how are you feeling today, sir,” she says each morning in an extortive drawl.

“Still sick,” I respond in my now raspy voice.

She brings me a variety of foods—fruits, vegetables, cheese, breads and meats that test my taste buds before being rejected by my inhospitable palate.

Most days are uneventful. The only common visitor apart from the care woman is the priest. Every night since my sickness began he has come and prayed for me in low murmurs.

When the sun is not shining in the morning, the birds seldom come to my window. Clouds at times shed their showers before my waking eyes. These mornings I spend studying the things within my room rather than the creatures without. Two particular objects have caught my eye. Each I will describe to you in turn, the first of which is a sculpted woman, made of marble and a decoration of the fire place.

When the sun has not graced me with its presence I spend much time examining this sculpture, watching dim shadows play across its frozen features. So superb is the

craftsmanship of this work of art that at first glance it looks to have risen out of the marble border of the furnace. Many days I have spent watching the slow shadows slide across the beautiful face. Indeed, so much have I spent in observation that I now perceive the most minute flaws in the stone being. However, the faults of this asymmetrical sculpture make the thing a hundred times more real than any of the faces that care for me each day. I admit to you; I have begun to perceive this sculpture as my only contemporary and when lonely within my room, speak to it of many things. Do not mistake me for mad, she has never spoken back, which indeed gives me great comfort for it is a relief to speak and not be answered by those who see me as a dying heart, a dying mind. I still marvel at the inconsistencies of the artist's craft, the way her white hair seems to flow to her left side slightly more than her right. How her right eye is perhaps more open than the left; the realism is frightening and I have thought at times that her eyes flutter when the shadow hits them just so. But most real is the hard stone skin of her marble cheeks and breasts. They mirror each other in a way perhaps never seen in a truly alive woman, but where the left cheek is more full than the right, so the right breast is more supple than the left. It is indeed the greatest sculpture known to man once perceived as through my eyes.

Not far above those empty, pupiless eyes is a sword that is set on the mantle. It is held by a wooden frame. Intricate script runs up the blade, though I am unable to read it from my bed. When it first gained my interest, days ago, I ventured to climb from my place, so to hold the thing, only to find myself upon the ground. The care woman came in before long with food, to find me stranded face down upon the floor as if prostrating myself to the God of gods. Since then I have viewed the sword only from a distance, for I do not wish to tell the care woman why I fell.

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The sun greets me on this particular day and I am glad to see the many birds play and sing. Through the flock one catches my attention more than any other. A sparrow. This is not an uncommon bird, quite the opposite in fact, but this sparrow draws my eye because of its extraordinary age. It stands quite still upon the balcony railing, which surprises me not in the slightest, indeed it looks unable to fly, many feathers are missing from its small body, only its wings look to be whole. The decrepit creature looks dead upon its feet. Despite this, the old thing hops to the edge of the railing and plummets only to rise again with a flurry of wings.

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I have had a dream. More than ever do I feel the sculpted woman to be alive, for last night she visited me within my sleep.

She was beautiful and slender as I knew she was in the waking life. Silks the color of marble draped her body and flew upon a wind. With her she carried a sword. Intricate script was marked upon the blade.

“Take it,” she said, “it is yours,” and she held it up so that I could read the engravings at last.

*Death is but the path of the unknown, upon it we may all find joy in solitude.*

Taking it from her hands I directed it into my chest and pushed.

I wake, but not in so much pain had the dream been real. The sun is shining through my window once again and upon the other side stands the old sparrow. Its decaying body making it look utterly defenseless in the final days of its life. It hops directly up to the glass doors and peers in with a clouded, pupiless eye. The sparrow then turns to peer in with an eye as black as onyx and as deep as any cavern, revealing the years of knowledge within the creatures mind.

It pecks upon the glass. Again, and a third time. It stands motionless. I can see now that it is time for this ancient creature to die. Bowing its head the sparrow is relaxed as it lets gravity pull it slowly to the ground where it slumped as if asleep.

I realize now that this bird is so ancient in its own world that all others of its kind mourn its death. As the creature passes on many birds of all kinds come to its aid, not knowing what to do, as if there is a cure for the sickness of age.

At this point a revelation hit me. I was not just sick. I was horribly sick, as the physicians had said; a sickness that could not be cured. The sickness of time weighed upon my shoulders as no other sickness could.

How could the many physicians hired not recognized that my ailment was nothing more than old age? All my care givers and healers overlook—or perhaps have been too kind to remind me that I am nearing my one hundredth and second birthday. This thought is now my salvation and I am forced to keep myself from laughing. I am not sick as so many had thought, merely old with the sickness of time.

Today is the first day I have left my bed without crumpling upon the floor as I did not long ago. I now understand my ailment and perhaps am beginning to understand my fate. I have been content with solitude and now no longer fear what is unknown. As the script upon the blade is etched: *Death is but the path of the unknown, upon it we may all find joy in solitude.*

I am no longer afraid, I am no longer sick.