

The Dragon's Rubies

It was late when Josh opened the door to Donna's apartment with a key he couldn't remember how he'd gotten; if she'd given it to him, if he'd stolen hers and made a copy, or if by some unidentifiable magnetic force the brass trinket had snuck itself to him and he'd instinctively known what it opened.

He opened the door for reasons unknown, reasons that would probably stay unknown, at least to Josh himself for the rest of his life. He shut the door behind him quietly, knowing that Donna didn't have a roommate anymore. The rooms were bizarrely cool for May and Josh suspected that the problem was that, once again, the building's heating/cooling system had crapped out. A pile of mail was balancing, against all odds, on the edge of the sofa: catalogues, a few magazines and some credit card applications that she hadn't yet torn up and thrown in the bin. There was a thin layer of dust on the little table by the couch and when Josh ran his fingers over it he left track marks on the surface, so that later she would know he had been here too.

Two of the plants on the kitchen windowsill had dropped dead around two months ago; the one with the big round leaves and a small vine thing that looked like dead spiders. There were dishes in the skink, two plates, two forks, a mug and a potato peeler. Crusts of mould had begun to grow on the plates and dark globs of a sticky-looking substance had congealed onto the silverware. When he opened the fridge a lone egg and three sticks of celery greeted him sullenly. Moving to her bedroom he notices she had made her bed but left two shirts strewn across it. He hadn't seen her wearing them lately.

He left with the idea that she would be where he didn't want her and when no one answered the door there, he undid the lock with the key Sam had given him. Sam had told him to come over any time, that he meant it. But that was back when they had still been friends, before Sam had taken Donna from him.

There was a note to get computer disks and Earl Grey tea on a post-it note, written in Donna's curly handwriting, hanging sideways on the wall by the door. A pile of scribbled papers with Sam's notes on them and a stack of CDs toppled on the table beside the blue couch, the one that overlooked the massive oil painting of the three sailing ships. He flipped through the CDs, screening names like Mendelssohn, Vivaldi and, oddly enough, the Beatles 1 album. There were also two Yo-yo Ma CDs. Donna's taste had never exactly run to Van Morrison, he thought, as he walked unwillingly into the bedroom. A handful of dry cleaning bags hung over the door on their flimsy wire hangers. There were two of her suits; including the brown tweed that she thought made her look dumpy — a classic Donna word — and five of Sam's starched shirts. Her mauve shirt with the bell sleeves hung down in his closet. There was a pair of tights in the trashcan by the bed and her opal necklace sat on top of his bureau where Sam usually dropped his keys.

There was apple shampoo in the bathtub, half a bottle of foundation on the toilet tank and a purple razor that he was sure wasn't Sam's. A hairy-leaved violet in a huge saucer greeted him as he entered the kitchen, blooming outrageous pink flowers — the same colour he often imagined her laughter. There were no dirty dishes in the sink but several take-out boxes in the trash. There was a note posted on the fridge on a half folded piece of yellow paper in Sam's handwriting: *'To catch a thief' (Cary Grant!), Sat 11:35 channel 4*, and then under it, underlined twice: *'Casablanca' Sunday 1pm, channel 57*.

It was all so comfortable, as if they were truly living it. And as he saw the load of clothes, whites, darks and colours, waiting to be folded, and the note on the refrigerator, he knew they were.

As he passed the note for computer disks and tea again on the way out, he almost considered taking it. Not because he was ever inclined to save his work to disk or to drink tea but because she had written it and she had never written him anything like that because, he realised, he had never written her anything about Cary Grant.

When Josh got back to his apartment Sam was waiting for him on the stone steps that bore the brunt of impatient feet and sullen weather. One look at Josh and Sam knew exactly what he had done and where he had been. They sat in silence for a while, both thinking of happier times when their friendship wasn't being torn apart, both thinking of Donna.

'Why do you love her?' Josh eventually asked.

'She inspires me,' Sam said and he knew that Josh didn't understand. 'She makes sense to me, I understand everything when I'm with her'

'What do you mean?'

'It's like when you sat in math and didn't understand how logarithms work and thought you never would and now suddenly you do. I understand why birds fly north, how to make the perfect pancake, why Whitman ended 'Song of Myself' the way he did. I understand iambic pentameter and peace and vindication, and hope. It clicks, it make sense. I understand what I never thought I would.'

Josh didn't say anything but Sam could feel the tension slipping from what was once his best friend. Their friendship would never be the same, if it survived at all. It would simply be different.

'I loved her too,' Josh said at last, looking out over the street.

In that moment Sam saw how much he had taken from Josh. In Josh he saw the tale his mother told him, as a child, of the dragon's rubies. It was said that when the slayer slit the dragon's breast, blood did not spill forth but rather a cascade of rubies in all cuts, carats and gushes of red. It was said that the dragons did not possess blood because they could not die and to rob them of their fortune was to take their lifeblood from them, to take their soul. Sam imagined Josh that way, bleeding without bleeding, bleeding rubies because Sam had robbed him of his treasure, had robbed him of Donna. When Josh finally looked at Sam, he nodded, because he understood why Sam had done it.

'You did the one thing I could never do, you made her happy,' and he relented then, for the friendship that once was. 'Go to her'. He gave Sam one last look as he got up to go inside and Sam thought that one day things might just be ok again.

She rose off the couch when he returned after Josh left him on the steps. He could read the question in her eyes and responded without her having to ask.

'He's ok' Sam told her, and for the first time since this all began, he actually believed it. She simply bowed her head in acceptance. There were six steps of space between them but he understood how logarithms worked. He understood how they explained that space wasn't really empty, that there was always a way to cross it, though, like early navigators exploring a world they thought was flat, it wasn't always the way you thought. The stars directed you, crossed though they were, and mostly this came at a cost.

She was wearing one of his grey t-shirts, so old that the lettering had come off and he couldn't remember where it was from. She had on a pair of jeans with bare feet and hair that seemed to glow. She crossed the space floating on logarithms and put her arms around him, sinking her head to his chest so that he knew she too understood the cost. He didn't doubt that she loved him. It wasn't a flashy or ostentatious love, this indefinable, undeniable thing between them; it was quiet and restful love of solace and filled rooms and breath. It was imperfect and would never be easy; they knew it, hated it and accepted it. He tilted her head and she looked at him with lupine eyes that filled with tears and he understood why people once called the moon the watery star. He touched his hands to each side of her face and wiped her tears away with his thumbs.

He had never understood before now, not in any of his previous relationships or in any contemporary literature classes he had taken, but he understood looking at her. The lack of punctuation at the end of Whitman's work always perplexed him and he had gotten into roaring debates with lecturers over it, stating that a poet's forgetfulness did not make history but, rather, questioned his grammar. But as she kissed him he knew Whitman and knew that some things went on forever and never ended. He knew the price of the dragon's rubies and the sin of Lancelot, and he loved her deeply enough to change his dreams and change the world.