**Chambermaid**

Stopping to listen breaking her rhythm

blackbird song and a thought coming to her from nowhere

what had it all been about? a question to capture their seven years together no seven*teen* years it was really or was it a decade yet since he’d left or only nine maybe? or what did it matter?

it mattered

to the dialogue she’d been having ever since ferocious the conversation because she was still everything she had been

everything

tipping the wash basin into the sink

a tally was needed to deal with this new question that wasn’t just a question but a summing up maybe

after seventeen years what had it been about?

suds rinsing away

absurd: blackbird song and a question as though flung from the top of the silver birch the new priest wanting it cut down she’d heard him making enquiries he was that kind - subsidence excuse insurance premiums no birdsong could ever move him

the former priest though

that they’d lain together in the guest bedroom upstairs not touching drowning in need to but talking softly instead listening instead breathing absorbing breathing watching each other’s chests rise and fall saying out loud what they’d carried silently the breech of something and when it fell well

what?

on the landing putting away the sheets and towels he’d called to her from downstairs Martha?

I’m up here

he went back into his office what did he want? she’d go to him in a sec

he came to her then climbing the stairs serious expression as though he had received bad news so stricken looking she’d tipped the folded pile and towels came spilling out of the press and he’d laughed No, not really a small gesture only because of her dismay a sigh just with a smile behind it and in his eyes she could read for her only that he was

she saw it and pity there too she saw for them both Come, he said she left the dropped laundry following him into the guest room and he closed the door contemplating for a moment with his hand on the door handle she thought he’d open it as he always did in the house if she was in a room and they would be alone together

his hand released he turned to her she smiled because his face was so grim

only a bed and a wardrobe in the small room crucifix over the bed she sat on the edge of the bed neatly made according to her own ways as a chambermaid years ago she’d learned how to billow a sheet with one movement so that it lifted high onto the air and floated down evenly upon the mattress his hands were trembling the silver band still there but not wearing his collar she noticed he hardly did these days in a normal shirt white shirt with the top button open and rolled up sleeves he stood by the edge of the bed So he said murmured really

she slumped inside at that looked down at her shoes she knew already what he’d say she saw a tiny nail clipping was snagged on the pale green carpet crescent moon of nail although no-one had stayed in the room for months and she hoovered it anyway every few days

this can’t Martha we we are

human she said she laid back across the mattress a shocking movement even to herself although her feet were only an inch from the floor and her arms were by her sides if we were young it wouldn’t raise a bother

Yes that’s true I’m too old he said evading

well she said I can see I’ll have to dust this lampshade I’ve never looked at it from this angle before he looked to the light-fitting in the ceiling a tiny snort a bubble of humour broke through what an image woman flat on her back man standing by laughing at the lampshade did she say that?

like in the films he said the old black and whites where there would have to be one foot on the floor at all costs he meant to say times

better look under the bed there might be a soundman hiding

you feel we aren’t alone Martha? querying her he often did that always curious about her thinking We’re being monitored?

when I was a child I was terrified of the dark and what lurked under the bed in the dark no matter how often it was checked I’d call to my mother but she’d rarely come my father if he was home would be sent no light the bulb had blown years ago he’d strike a match kneel down to show me look nothing there’s nothing I’d peer over the edge knowing it wouldn’t be there not when it was looked for not in the light

in the adult’s view you mean?

of course not when he went then no matter how I’d beg him to stay when I was left alone it came snaking back underneath terror in the darkest place impenetrable we’d learned about it at school the devil was everywhere ready to pull you down through cracks in the pavement

you’re saying my belief is irrational? my faith a superstition?

just that things change he said nothing I believe she said but

she had changed developed as he put it developed what? the word reminded her of puberty and cup sizes insight was his answer he wouldn’t allow himself to blame her for what had happened

that was insight

but what had happened? using the keys he’d given her she entered the house three days a week alert for the sound of his voice he would be in his office usually on the phone to a parishioner talking loudly because many of them were elderly the normality of his tone she craved went to pausing a moment by his door then she’d do her work becoming her work her regime lit the need which had gathered when she was apart from him

turning taps filling the washing machine wiping polishing polishing scrubbing his toilet even attended to his smears she was a flame burning herself into physical rituals with the radio on low for company No for normality a low-ebb-jingling reassuringly there masking the risk to herself in that place his with a live-wire pulse holding between them that they might that he might

she stopped going to his masses as self-preservation even though she loved seeing him in his most sacred guise adoration and humility the raised eucharist in his clean fingers his serious prayerful voice it made her life into something like a caught breath vulnerable yet strong like the blackbird song it was a pure a vital register that was her understanding

she withdrew from his masses knowing that it would pollute her being there it already had because it bothered him severely early on a look from each to each once when she stood at the altar-rail opened her mouth to receive her tongue her eyes noticing the tremble in his hand

small shifts she made to allow for this immense feeling give it space give it time

insight

endless when she was alone torture producing tactics because what else could she? withdrawal was one she would not make the mistake of adopting any unofficial role

she would not answer the phone or the door on his behalf she didn’t go to parishioner funerals take messages from the men and women she met on the street leaving the house as soon as her work hours were met no slippage could be allowed even her hair she stopped colouring let the grey take it although once he had called her a brunette

she alone saw how everything was different a revolution in the tidy house because love is revolutionary so he’d declared from the pulpit she had absorbed those words deeply held fast to the strength of his belief when he said it her sister noticed something you look happy she said because her sister could see through her like glass she didn’t tell her sister

she poured herself into her three sessions a week the house coming alive through her fingers He adored plants she tended them the house bloomed even that ugly furniture that he’d brought seemed to mellow the rooms softening their judgement as though in response to the shifts she made all the accusations side-stepped because she knew she knew how guilt would be her strongest adversary

Catholic guilt two thousand years of male hypocrisy was what she faced she told him so and he nodded but kept his true thoughts to himself and she told him that as well

their conversations their intercourse as she liked to think when in a jokey frame of mind were brave the only rule he said was to be completely honest and to not hold back from truth

impossible of course she held back plenty and so she surmised did he which also had to be confessed

she came into the house one day and noticed a small pink plaster curved around his earlobe

she was early surprising him in the hallway he retreated to his office what is that? she demanded before he got away just a precaution answered gruffly most likely nothing to worry about he went into his room closed the door quietly decisively she felt him standing on the other side from her looking at his hand on the doorhandle she went to her kitchen

the scare turned out to be benign but the time of waiting was not so several weeks of hospital appointments and secrecy she’d steamed a letter open with the boiling kettle to find out she shouldn’t have done it because the letters were not there anymore on the hall table and a look he gave that he knew and this became a wrong between them became *the* wrong causing discussions behind his closed door to quieten when she approached

soon turning into post-it notes left beside the kettle: cancellations of her hours without reasons given and what could she say? what could she do? as he detached from her a chill settling over the house the light was it? she felt the light dimming but she couldn’t mention anything because of the worry for him she prayed for insight it showed her that she was a cleaner and he was anointed by God

two priests never seen before arrived she opened the door to them only because she had to know what was happening the look on their faces a glance exchanged between them they went into his office she stayed late beyond her time loitering in the kitchen would you like tea or coffee she offered her voice was another woman’s

no thanks Martha quietly said he looked across to the clock on the mantle back to her then with such an expression mortal final

wing-feathers littered on the grass lift one from the mess stiff taffeta black on white sinew let the wind take it

I love that blackbird she’d said from the kitchen once not that long before he went away He’d been standing in the open doorway to the garden listening to the creature

Surprise as he turned the sight of her full in his eyes early summer’s evening it was the melody carried between them like a child being swung in the air confident ringing out against the odds life code in long trails thrown gloriously to the sky passed on to her in his lit grey eyes

revealing everything the pure love song holding nothing back fearless the measure of its mysterious joy

What had it all been about?