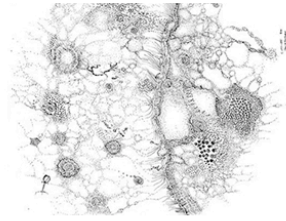




Prick of the Spindle



Guest artist: Regina Valuzzi. Graphic shown above right: 'Bacteriophage Ballet'

Current Issue ^{Vol. 7.3} Interviews Archive About Galleries Guidelines



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links

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Doves on Trafalgar Square

By Zuzanna Fimińska

To Simon, in case the book thing doesn't work out.

I was standing in front of the Bodleian Library when she trotted down the stairs of the Radcliffe Camera, brown leather bag hanging on her shoulder, a stack of paper under her arm. She was wearing a camel wool coat that reached to an inch above her ankles, exposing green sneakers with yellow laces, and a trim of gym socks. The mismatch of seasons between the coat and the shoes was so striking, I almost didn't notice her perfectly straight hair with the fringe cut evenly along the midline of her forehead. She walked quickly, with a sense of purpose, now holding the papers against her chest, her frame slightly bent forward, protective of the notes, ready to confront the obstacles head-first. Suddenly she tripped, and all those pages whirled in the air like a flock of doves circling over Trafalgar Square.

She shook her head, looking up as thousands of pages – covered with her dainty yet perfectly legible handwriting – hit the air, attempting to escape the fate of becoming inconsequential. She struggled to catch them. It was a foggy Oxford day and the Rad Cam behind her looked like a long-awaited sailboat emerging from a cloud. I could hear the crowds cheering and chanting as they welcomed sailors triumphantly returning, and

as she squatted to pull the sheets together, I wanted to scream to warn her about the approaching ship that would crush her on the cobblestone path.

She stacked all the sheets into a pile and pressed it down with her bag, as if locking the doves in a cage. She stood over it, hands on hips, as if saying, ‘If you try this again, guys, it will not end well for you.’ She took her coat off and licked her lips. I could tell there was a thin, salty film covering her skin, and if I kissed her neck at that point and then tried to kiss her mouth, she would blush. She wiped her face with her palms and looked in my direction. I thought she smiled at me, or at least acknowledged my presence, and I started moving toward her, rehearsing what I would say under my breath, my wheels making a disconcerting sound against the ground. Someone cut in front of me, but I was too focused on her to notice whether he apologized, or checked if I were all right, and the only thing I could hear was him saying: ‘I’m sorry I’m late. Have you been waiting long?’ He helped her put on her coat before grabbing her cage with the doves, and the two of them passed by me on their way toward Broad Street.

The next time I saw her was at graduation. For three years, I had wondered whether she was still around. She never came to any of the Union events, although I knew she was a member. She never showed up to any of the very few Oxford-sanctioned social events accessible to people in wheelchairs. She wasn’t there for plays, debates, or poetry recitals. I moved around the city looking for green sneakers with yellow laces, refusing to accept that she may have worn them off and moved on to a pair in a different color. She told me later that the only time she ever wore a different pair of shoes was with academic dress. She walked down the aisle in green sneakers, too, and her laces that day were made of the fabric leftover from the bridesmaids’

dresses.

She recognized me in the queue to the Sheldonian. There were two other students in wheelchairs, so I don't suppose this was a particular feat, but still, she recognized me, and after the ceremony, she waited outside of the theater and asked me for a drink. We went to The Bear.

'Are you sure you want to stay here?' she asked before we ordered a glass of pear cider each.

'Yes, I'm fine, don't worry about me,' I said defensively, navigating the minuscule space of the pub. It was quiz night and we found ourselves joining one of the seven teams, thinking that we would get our Oxford degrees' worth of money in the free chips they served during the game, and in drink tickets, which were the first prize. By round four we were second from the bottom, and when they brought out round five, themed 'Sworn Enemies' – in which one had to identify characters from classic films and cartoons – we looked at each other and laughed, disillusioned.

'Sam,' she said when the pub deserted, 'I'm going to ask you one question and depending on your answer, I may ask you to marry me or decide never to speak to you again. Do you agree?'

I nodded.

'Would you like to live on a sailboat and only own a hundred items?'

My palms went cold as I prayed for her to be serious.

We married within a month, and when we started grad school, we rented a room in a crappy house on Iffley Road, put both of our diplomas on the wall, and spent our days working on our dissertations, limiting our purchases to the essentials, dreaming of

one day living on a boat off the coast of Australia. We subscribed to two copies of *The Guardian* and read a week's worth of newspapers over full English breakfast on Sundays, always sharing with our eight housemates, who loved our discussions about the cultural nuances of dismemberment of human remains. Eight years later we bought a house in South London and adopted a cat. We talked once about having kids.

Each morning of the eighteen years we spent together – the most frustrating, the most vexing, the most challenging period of my life – I asked her to look into my eyes before she left for work. She knew how much I needed that image of her, with her ink-colored hair in place, a pile of papers under her arm – pretty much the same as the first time I saw her, albeit more in control – she wiggled her head, but let me have it, and sometimes I wondered whether she did that out of love for me, or out of pity for her handicapped husband.

It's been ten years since she left the house in her dark gray suit matched with her signature sneakers. She didn't want to go to work that day. Her hair was out of place, she explained, and no matter what she did, she couldn't feel comfortable with it. She looked at me for reassurance. 'You're right,' she continued before I could say anything. 'I should not miss work. I love my work. And my work loves me, so I suppose my clients will have to deal with a crabby, poorly groomed attorney.'

'You look lovely,' I threw in.

'You know that your saying this doesn't make it true?'

I resisted replying, because if we got into a debate about what made something true, she would have never gone to work again. Ready to leave, she stood at the threshold of the house, put the tips of her fingers to her temples, as if she had a

headache.

‘It’s nothing,’ she said, shaking her head. ‘It is really nothing.’ She gazed at me. ‘We’ll nail that truth thing when I get back.’

I never changed *The Guardian* subscription and I always set the table for two. For the first three years, I continued making conversation with her, but I only ever tackled casual things, too stricken for anything else. I’d tell her what I wrote on a given day, what the cat brought home, and what part of the house needed fixing. I made up her side of the conversation: she admired my concentration, she hated when the cat brought things home, and she was outraged that something in the house was broken again.

‘Before you say that I should have known better than to buy a house without having it inspected,’ she’d say, ‘let me remind you that we can always fix the house, but we could never get ourselves a view of a park, could we, now?’ And before I could respond, she would add: ‘Yes, I know, I should have negotiated a better price, but look at the view! Isn’t it gorgeous?’ She would ask this standing by the window, arms raised high, as if she were addressing a crowd of faithful supporters cheering in her honor.

‘There goes an Oxford-educated lawyer,’ I’d tease, and she would look at me over her shoulder, as if trying to remind me that, unlike me, an expert in Tudor history, she spent her university years reading something useful. She would then throw herself on the kitchen chair, in a dramatic gesture of reconciliation, and I would pour her a large glass of red wine, while she rested her elbows on the table and massaged the nook of her neck.

Through all that I knew she was not there, but the realization of this fact always

took me by surprise. I would stop mid-bite and spit out the food that was already in my mouth. I would clench my fingers around the knife and fork and I would pray under my breath that this wasn't true, that she wasn't gone, that there was still something that hadn't been tried. But saying it didn't make it true.

For some reason, at moments like that, I always pictured her hunching over those thick volumes of legal theory, collecting her hair in her fist on the top of her head. She said it kept her focused.

It was a gentle winter afternoon when they called me from the hospital telling me to come as soon as I could but not to worry, not to worry at all, they were running some tests, too soon to tell, they would explain everything when I got there. I thought she'd broken a hip. Her mother had brittle bones, and she was never careful when seasons changed. She used to joke that if she ever needed hip replacement, I would have to take a course on how to make love to a barely mobile person, just as she had taken a class in the technicalities of intimacy with a paraplegic man.

That comment upset me.

'Don't be ridiculous, Sam, you know I don't mean it like that.' She tilted her head, realizing that being paralyzed from waist down and getting a platinum hip was not the same thing. Rolling through the A&E, I was dreading that she might have met with either fate.

'Can I help you, sir?' a nurse asked before I got to her station. Hospitals are the only place where strangers are not afraid to speak to people in wheelchairs.

'My wife is here. I was called to come.'

'Name?'

‘Sam Melville.’

She leaned toward a computer screen.

‘I’m sorry, Mr. Melville, I don’t see anyone with that name here.’

‘Oh that’s right. My wife didn’t take my name. It’s Sarah, Sarah Cowen. Sorry about that... They told me to come as soon as I could.’

She scanned the list again.

‘Oh,’ she hesitated. ‘Yes, that’s right. Sarah Cowen. She was brought in earlier today. She’s Dr Supra’s patient.’ She reached for the phone. ‘He will be right with you.’

‘Where is my wife? Can I see her?’

‘She’s been moved to the surgical unit, but you can’t see her right now, I’m afraid. She’s getting some tests done at the moment. You can go to the fifth floor and wait for Dr Supra there...’

I wheeled away without thanking her.

Dr Supra turned out to be a young Indian gentleman with an air of confidence and authority that I had never ascribed to anyone. He confessed to me later that he was top of his class at each of the schools he’d ever attended and that he finished his doctorate in clinical neuroscience at King’s College two terms ahead of schedule. It wasn’t bragging. It was an unusual admission of defeat.

‘Miss Cowen was unconscious when they brought her in...’

‘Sarah. Her name is Sarah. Please call her Sarah,’ I pleaded, as if what he called her made any difference.

He nodded.

‘Sarah was unconscious when they brought her in, and she hasn’t woken up yet.’

We ran a few tests to see what's going on and there seems to be bleeding in her brain.' He was sitting in front of me, resting his forearms on his thighs, looking me in the eyes. He didn't hesitate or flinch once when he spoke. I envied everything about him. He had the skills and the knowledge to save Sarah, and he didn't have a wife of his own whose life he would have to relinquish to the expertise of a stranger.

'We're going to operate right away, and there are some forms I'd like you to fill in,' he said without pretending I could give an *informed* consent. By the time I signed the last form, Sarah was being taken into an operating room, safeguarded from me by a key-card-operated door with a bright sign that read *Authorised Personnel Only*.

The surgery took nine hours. An intern – Jack or Jon or Jerry – came out every forty-five minutes to give me a vague update and to reassure: 'It's good when they take their time; that means they're being thorough,' he would say, impatient to go back, his eyes straying toward the door he had just come through.

It's astounding how little one can do waiting for a ruling on the rest of one's life. I tried to read, but my ability to see letters as meaningful symbols had vanished. I tried to write, but I had nothing to say. I tried to pray, but I couldn't turn thoughts into words, and deprived of the privileged refuge of language, I imagined her growing emaciated.

When they brought her out, I stared at her from the opposite side of the room. She was not that vexing person I'd let out of the house the day before. She was not the girl I saw catching paper doves in front of the Rad Cam. She was not the person who made everybody play Woolf on my fortieth birthday, who built a totem of Sesame Street characters in the corner of her office, and who refused to eat anything out of a can. This thing in the hospital bed was a bundle of flesh, covered in bandages, attached

to tubes with fluids and cables connected to machines that were making beeping noises at regular intervals, muffled by the shuffling of a respirator. She was strange, foreign, undiscovered.

‘People make mistakes. You could have made a mistake!’ I said to the nurses. But they haven’t made a mistake. It was her, Sarah Cowen –my Sarah! –of 49 Hill Top Road, born on 12 March 1967, a solicitor at Dawson Cornwell, a wife to Sam Melville, who was also her emergency contact.

‘You should go home, sir,’ the nurse said. ‘You need rest. We’ll call you if anything changes, but for now you really do not need to be here.’

I stayed. In the morning, Dr Supra invited me into his office. He shut the door and asked if I wanted a glass of water. I declined. He asked if we had any children. I told him how Sarah didn’t care for being a mother, and how, having done some research, we felt discouraged by the tricks of the fertility trade developed for couples like us.

‘I see. Is there anyone else you’d like to call? A friend? A relative?’

‘No relatives to speak of, I’m afraid. And our friends are scattered all over the world.’

I never realized how restricted my world was to her.

He didn’t have good news. He said that she had come in with bleeding, that they operated and that it went well, that they stopped the bleeding and limited the damage, but by the time they got to it, much of her brain had become a death field.

‘When can I take Sarah home?’ I asked. I guess he thought I didn’t hear him, or that I ignored him, or that I just didn’t understand what he was trying to tell me.

‘I’m afraid Sarah won’t be going home with you, sir. She should have woken up by now, but she hasn’t.’

‘That’s all right, I’ll wait...’

He looked away.

‘It is allowed, isn’t it? I am allowed to sit by her side until she wakes up, right?’

‘Sir...’

‘It’s Sam; please call me Sam,’ I heard myself say, as if informality was a magic spell that could change the fact that I let her out of the house that day, when she had a headache, and when her hair didn’t sit right.

Dr Supra told me she had signed a donor card. I knew that. Of course I knew that; we signed those cards together, in vain hope that it would give us good karma in case we ever needed an organ ourselves. But I objected, and asked him if, now that my wife was unconscious, I could have a final say. He looked at me with a head tilt, as if an immense load of pity for a middle-aged man in a wheelchair with a comatose wife had been dropped upon him all of a sudden.

I knew she hated the idea of being on life support. We had talked about it on the way back from The Bear to her place that night after graduation. At the time she lived in Heddington, but she wanted to take a detour before climbing up the hill to take the last look at the Rad Cam.

‘Don’t you find it odd that it’s not lit at night?’ she’d asked.

‘None of the Oxford landmarks are,’ I remarked, pointing out that the only well-lit University property was the Magdalen bell tower.

‘It’s like they lose their charisma when the sun goes down. They don’t need to

impress anyone when it's dark, so there's no point illuminating them. Smart, don't you think? A frugal way of using resources, turning the light off where it's not needed...'

I said nothing. I should have realized at the time that what she was saying was morbid, but I was too happy, too impressed with myself for being with her to realize that she was being serious. She made me promise that when the time was right, I would let her go. I did. She joked that first-date declarations were binding, and I said, of course they are, foolishly convinced that this could never happen.

I got home that day from the hospital to find that the cat had brought home a squirrel. She dragged the poor creature across the floor, spilling out its viscera. My lack of interest must have thrown her off because out of the blue she froze and stared at me, as if confused by my under-appreciation, and then she left me alone in the room looking over the frosted park, with a totem of Sesame Street characters in one corner, and a stack of unopened, double copies of the past-week's *Guardian* in the other.

One of her kidneys went to a 14-year-old boy from the top of the transplant list. Her heart went to a fifty-year-old father of four, and her liver was given to an alcoholic on his hundredth day of sobriety.

Not a day goes by that I don't hear the shuffling of that respirator slowing down and eventually fading away. It was that final stroke of wings, the last plea for relevance, before the doves deserted Trafalgar Square.