

PROMISES

by Eric Boyd

There was a bird on the windowsill, a sparrow, its silhouette backlit by a view of Uptown. She remembered many sparrows during her forced trips to Mercy Hospital. She would often look out the window during her visits, watching them fly as far as downtown Pittsburgh before returning back to the hospital. That was all over now. Nothing was left to be taken care of besides the services and the will. She felt certain she'd get the house, which had been passed down through generations, from when Pittsburgh was a great city and Uptown was still a respectable place. Now, only junkies and bums lined Fifth Avenue, and the most respectable place there was a Plasma Center. If she did get the house, she thought of leaving it behind, furniture and all, with the door wide open for everyone. She knew she didn't want the place.

From the other side of the room, she looked at the sparrow on the windowsill. It looked back with small, black, knowing eyes. While its wings moved about repeatedly, the bird didn't move from its perch; it just flapped as if there was something stuck in its feathers.

She adjusted her veil, turning back toward the mirror when there was a knock at the door. She knew it was her brother. "Come in," she said.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Nervous?"

"A bit."

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Earlier in the day, they had been arguing. She didn't want to go through with it, but he was pushing hard.

"Here," he'd said, handing her a small stack of note cards. "I wrote up some things for you to read."

She scanned the cards quickly. "That's all a bunch of crap."

“Look,” he snipped, “great men do bad things. It just happens. Some men drink; sometimes, after they drink, they get crazy; whatever they do while they’re crazy can’t be held against them. *Won’t* be held against him, understand?”

“You know that it happened more than once,” she said, trying to hold back.

“I don’t know anything about that. In fact,” he frowned unconvincingly, trying to contort his actual expression, “the only thing I do know is that the will can be changed. Play along and we’ll all be happier. Promise.”

She sighed and rubbed her temples.

“Just read what I gave you.”

“I don’t think I’ll—”

He interrupted her. She wiped her mouth and checked the back of her hand for blood.

“You know I’ll be getting the business—definitely the North Side warehouses, anyway. And if you’re lucky, you might end up a piece of something—I hear you might even get this house—but like I said, the will is fluid. Why do you think I got my lawyer on it? I need this, so why don’t you keep your mouth shut,” he fumed, pausing to look at her pursed lips. “Yeah, see! Just like that. Keep it shut unless you’re reading what I gave you to read. I got Sheryl and Gene to care for. The fuck you got? Let me handle this. I get the business, sell it off, give everyone a cut, then get the hell out of here with my family. Whatever you’re in for now, I’ll try to make sure you get a little more after this is all said and done. That’s not so bad.”

First he wasn’t so bad, she thought, and now his son wasn’t, either. Awful, heartless people were never so bad. That was their great comfort—that someone, somewhere, was probably worse than them. It was like Lucifer falling back on his days as an angel.

Before she could say anything else, he left the room, slicking back his mussed hair and closing the door behind him.

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“So you're ready to go?” he asked impatiently. It'd been an hour since the argument and they were running late.

Without turning around, she held up the note cards. She heard him walk out of the room, the door left open. His footsteps were as hollow as he was. She adjusted the veil one more time and stuffed the notes in her bag, complete with revisions.

From across the room, she looked at the sparrow again. After a moment, she walked over to the window and opened it. The bird didn't move, only stared up at her, cocking its head from side to side in bemusement. She knew that, to the bird, she was already dead.

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