

Walk with Grace

Originally published in Shipwrights Review.

If Linda hadn't seen the white cat a third time, she would have finished building the nesting box.

The small red house with white corners in which Linda lived, and which was now supposed to roof her lonesome retirement, had been built by her late husband's, George's, great grandfather. The house had single-handedly been summoned to stand by the sweat of the proud man's brow, plank by plank, stone by stone, hammer-blow by persevering hammer-blow. It did sound like some great feat, and it did require effort, but really it wasn't much: a small two-storey house on the island of Sturkö, in the south of Sweden. The roof was unevenly tilted, and the walls were partly insulated with now disintegrated magazines and newspapers. Nevertheless, it was the great grandfather's legacy, and it had, with slight reconstructions, additions, and renovations, been home to Linda and George for close to three decades. George's legacy, on the other hand, was an unfinished nesting box.

The image of a little bird with the handle of a small suitcase in its beak coursed through Linda's mind as she looked at a stack of rectangular blocks of wood lying on the workbench of the little green tool shed. George's grandfather had built the tool shed, or so Linda had been told. Next to the stack lay a damp, hand-drawn sketch.

Linda had woken to her first day of retirement from a life of teaching mathematics at upper secondary school in Karlskrona with a singular purpose: she was going to finish what George had started. The nesting box, she felt, had to get built, as a concluding gesture. After all, George had died where she was now standing, on the close to rotten floor of the tool shed. A sudden heart-attack had thrown him down, and Linda had found him a couple of hours later, cold and white. This had been a year ago, and now, at the twilight of a long and anonymous teaching career, when she had the time on her hands, she was set on finishing the nesting box.

She searched for the power drill. The door, slightly ajar and hanging on rusty hinges, creaked behind her. She turned around. A thin gap between the door and the frame cut and dropped a diagonal slice of sun to the floor. Inside the slice of sun there was a cat. Its fur was sleek and white. It had a small blue bird in between its teeth. The bird's neck was broken, and drops of dark blood dripped along one of its wings down to the floor.

The cat looked at Linda and let go of the bird. It--a mess of blue and red--dropped to the floor. The cat turned and slipped out.

Linda looked at the bird and then left the shed, her heart thumping.

The cat was already by the chain link gate at the other end of the lawn, next to George's untended and overgrown flower-patch. Linda watched the cat's seamless movements, like a slow wave, and she tried to gauge what she was feeling, why her heart was thumping?

She touched her hair, as if to soothe herself, and her eyes followed the cat as it continued up the narrow gravel road toward her neighbor's, Grace's, beautiful villa, its roof evenly angled, and its walls, she was sure, weren't lined with old magazines and newspapers. She could see the cat duck under the hedge surrounding the villa.

I didn't know Grace had a damned cat, Linda thought, and that was it: damned cat. What it had done, killing and leaving a bird on the floor of her shed, felt like a forced invitation, and she'd have none of that.

She returned to the shed; she picked up the bird and cleared a space in the flower patch to bury it. She decided to leave the building of the nesting box for later.

That evening after a small meal, she massaged her neck while sitting in the living room's loveseat, close to the row of book-shelves lining the wall, stacked with books George had never read. Neither had he ever massaged her neck. But, she thought, and pinched a knot to the left of her neck: hadn't he been a good husband? And the cat's movement: hadn't it been almost sensual?

The next morning was beautiful and tilted. The summer sun colored the upstairs bedroom a soft yellow. As usual, Linda enjoyed a long, cold shower and got dressed in a variation of her usual outfit: a dress with a floral pattern, wide enough to hide the slack bulk of old age, and a single-colored vest. She combed her thin grey hair behind her ears and attached large, circular earrings. She entered the kitchen and started to boil water for the morning coffee, a pitch black and assured kick-start to a day of teaching. At which point she remembered she was retired. There was no need for dress-up.

"Oh," she hummed. She was a sixty seven year old teacher with no obligation to teach. It came as a jolt. She had to force herself out of her regular morning routine.

She undressed. She put on her late husband's blue work pants and a striped tee that hugged her hanging breasts. She had a nesting box to build, and so she left for the tool shed.

She drilled three small holes evenly distanced from each other on one side of one rectangular block of wood. She placed the power drill on the workbench. Sweat was dripping from her forehead. Her heart pounded, her left arm tingled, and her knees and neck ached.

When she turned to leave the shed, the white cat was once again there. Once again it had a small blue bird between its teeth, and once again it left the poor bird's body on the floor. This time, though, Linda didn't hesitate. She charged at the cat, even though it was more of a stumble.

The cat slipped through the crack in the door and leapt across the lawn. It slipped past the gate, floated up the gravel road to Grace's, and disappeared under the hedge. All in one smooth wavelike movement.

Linda, unable to take chase--she'd never been able to move like water, not even when young--walked determinedly across the lawn, her knees creaking. She opened the gate with what felt like great purpose. The gravel under the soles of her shoes spoke, and it said, "This won't do; this just won't do."

The action of the knock handle on the oak door, a brass lioness biting down on a ring, didn't seem to pass through the density of the door. Linda couldn't help but feel irritated at the lack of an electronic doorbell. She grabbed the circular handle and forced it to the door once more, a castrated knock.

"Hello!"

The door opened. Grace appeared in the doorway, sleek-skinned and not a day older than forty, although she, like Linda, was past retirement-age. She wore her silver hair in a knot in the back. Her large brown eyes seemed to project a sort of worldly good-will.

"Linda," she said and put her hands on her bony hips, the equally bony elbows akimbo. "To what do I owe the honor?"

Linda took in all of Grace: her quipping manner and brash youthfulness. Once, she remembered, Grace had said she preferred singlehood to the boredom

of men. Linda had to admit that the supposed absence of boring men in Grace's life had aged her well.

"It's about your cat," Linda said. "It kills birds and leaves them at my place." Her voice was even and steady, like the one she'd often used to discipline unruly students.

Grace smiled, and it was, Linda once again felt the need to admit, a beautiful smile: all straight and white teeth. It was a deafening smile. Linda didn't catch Grace's response.

"I'm sorry?" she said.

"I don't have a cat, Linda. I've never had a cat."

Linda leaned back and swept her arm out, as if this gesture was clarification enough, which, she realized, it wasn't. She felt at a loss.

"I saw a white cat enter your yard."

Grace looked past Linda's shoulder. She seemed to be considering the statement as if it were an abstract equation.

"Yes," she said and sucked on the word. "I may have seen a stray white pass through, but it's not mine." Once again she smiled.

Is she patronizing me? Linda thought. She said, "Never mind, Grace. I'm sorry if I disturbed--"

"Oh, don't you worry, Linda. I was going for a walk. Care to join?"

Linda didn't care to join. She hadn't cared to join Grace during their decade as neighbors, and invitations to walks and lunches hadn't been lacking, especially not after the death of George.

"I have a bird house to build," Linda said.

Grace did not seem surprised by the response; however, her smile did lose some of its perkiness.

After burying the second bird, Linda drilled three small holes unevenly distanced from each other on the other side of the same rectangular block of wood. She now had six holes. They looked like small mouths, like small lamenting mouths: futility in the shape of o.

She put down the power drill and looked intently at the holes.

George had been retired since the age of fifty-five due to a work-place accident: a crane at the garage had somehow whipped his back. He hadn't wanted to talk about it and explain the details, but when he did talk about it he always said, "It's one of those odd things that can happen. I'm just glad I'm alive, that I didn't break my back."

His retirement-strategy had been to take to bird-watching, binoculars in one hand and a cane in the other. From morning to evening during spring, summer, and autumn he spotted birds, small and large--all the variations of his particular slice of sky. During winter, when darkness enveloped, he sat in the love seat in the living room and organized his so-called bird notes according to some system Linda didn't know. That had been their relationship for the last decade before his fatal heart-attack: a stretch of silence. Linda no longer had clear images of how it had been before that, and now, while looking at the six small holes, she couldn't help but feel like half a person, if even that.

That's life, though, Linda thought. She left the shed. She felt light-headed, and she wondered if maybe she was dehydrated. And she would have walked to the kitchen if she hadn't seen the white cat again. She would have emptied a glass of water and sat down by the kitchen table; she would have read a good book, and she would have found the energy and purpose necessary to finish building the nesting box. But she saw the cat, and the cat was jumping around the lawn, batting its paws at yet another little bird.

"No," Linda said and charged toward the lawn, "no more!" Her legs, however, didn't want to carry her, and as she approached the cat she stumbled

onto her stomach. She strained to roll onto her back. Her left arm pulsated and sweat flooded her face. She clenched her teeth, feeling something inside her let loose.

The curious face of the white cat drifted past her blurred vision. It had a bird for her, and it put the bird on her chest. Before Linda's vision darkened, she knew she would never finish the nesting box.

If I don't die, she thought, I'll burn the blocks and the sketch. Maybe I'll burn the shed, even the house. Maybe I'll have that walk with Grace.