

CANARY ERROL

A Short Story

by

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We had glued together the small sticks of blackboard chalk and hung them from the ceiling like stalactites. I handed up Dora the last, fragile, six-foot, length of pink chalk. This time everything went well: the chalk did not break. Dora whistled, softly, turned around and sat on the top step of the ladder.

“Next the *Chinese Lanterns*,” she said, smiling.

Most of the afternoon had been spent sticking the pieces of chalk together. The place was a mess. Bits of coloured chalk were everywhere. I fetched a damp towel from the kitchen. The smell of turkey in the oven was delicious. Dora wiped her hands, then bent down and touched my arm.

“Bring me: ‘*The Star of Eve*’, love.”

I wanted to get the job finished and eat.

“When you’re in the cellar... bring the gold tinsel as well. And don’t forget to switch off the light.”

I went down the stone-steps and heard her call out: “Also, the *Bells* and the *Concertina* things!” The cellar worried me. I always felt uncomfortable there. Gardening tools hung from hooks in the roof; their wooden, handles and stems beautifully stained and varnished.

The prongs of the fork glittered. Yet... the front garden was *paved* and at the rear the garages were separated by sand and concrete pathways. I ran my hands over the metal ribs of a birdcage. Why should Dora need to keep gardening-tools? It did not make sense.

“The *Chinese Lanterns* make all the difference,” I said, admiring her arrangement above the big mirror. I put the carrier-bag down and pulled out what I thought was the ‘*Star of Eve*’ but Dora told me to put it back.

“That’s only nonsense!” she said, sharply.

“What’s wrong with it?”

She began to fold the ladder up. Her mood had changed. She seemed tired.

“Why do you put fresh seed in the birdcage?” I asked. “There’s also a tiny tray of clean water.”

She sighed and held my hand tightly. “Oh, decorations...”

“Do you think you might be putting them up a bit early? It’s still nearly a month to Christmas.”

She sucked in her bottom lip. “What a fuss! You’re helping me, are you not? And they’re *Japanese* not *Chinese Lanterns*. You’re always trying to confuse me. Oh, why do I bother... decorations are always disappointing. Never what you imagine.”

“Dora,” I spoke quietly, “it’s not certain, I’ll be able to get away. You know how difficult the Christmas period is for me. Of course, everything should work out ... I just don’t want you to be disappointed.”

I followed her into the kitchen. We prepared the vegetables in silence. “The decorations will cheer me up no end,” she said, suddenly. “And there’s usually one good film on TV at Christmas.”

When the meal was nearly over and the record finishing, Dora pushed back her chair and jumped to her feet. “Sammy, have you seen my corner flower?”

I mopped up the spilt wine. “No, not recently. No, Dora, I haven’t seen your flower.”

“I don’t mean where is it! I don’t mean have you seen it *anywhere* but have I *showed* it you?”

I decided to ask her about the gardening equipment. Irritated, she flung her fruit-bowl into the sink. “I’m minding them, Sammy. You know we’d have no use for such things here.”

We sat by the fire in the front-room. One aspect of Dora’s place I’d always liked was being able to warm myself in front of a real, coal-fire. She poured Brandy into my wine.

I patted my stomach. “Nice bit of *Xmas* turkey. Must admit those birds looked slightly pathetic in the butcher’s; not fully-grown, fattened up and fed for Christmas yet. At home, we usually buy a fourteen-pounder... To tell you the truth, I wasn’t sure I could eat it.”

“They’re good value, that’s all.”

“Look how that cluster of chinks brightens up the room. Anyone else, and I’d have thought the idea a little weird.”

She laughed nervously.

“What is it, Dora? Your hands are shaking. I’ve got a surprise... Come up to the bedroom in a minute... I know it’s not your cup of tea so don’t laugh. It’s nothing much. Really it isn’t. That was the reason I didn’t ask you over last week.”

Dora stretched her legs and fitted her slippers back on. Her face was flushed. She stood up smiling at me, then moved to the door. I went over and kissed her. “Blindfold me, again, Dora.”

She rubbed the back of my neck and whispered: “You and your silly games. Listen, I’ve made a crib! That’s why I couldn’t see you last week.”

“I’m sure you did a very artistic job... But what is a corner-flower?”

After a long silence, she said, “I’ve hidden it.”

“A sunflower?”

“No, that’s an outdoor flower, silly.”

Her ambiguous flower and my dream.

Yesterday, I wrote a report on my dream. Dissected it and gave it the full analytical treatment. Now, it’s filed away. Locked up like all my notes...

To begin with, I was in bed, my body stiff, only able to move my head. The morning was grey and sleety. Dora, asleep in the adjoining room. Gradually, I managed to move my hands a little. Just before dusk, someone else came into the room. A woman, quite elderly and wearing a shapeless raincoat bent over me and began taking flashlight photographs. I shouted that she was blinding me...

When my sight returned, I was in a much smaller room, the windows wide open. It was a dry, hot night. A different climate. The bed was an old-fashioned, four-poster screened by mosquito netting. From the building opposite, neon-signs flashed on and off. A voice drifted up from the street. “The restaurant’s just opened.” The other woman who I instantly recognised as Dora, said: “I can’t afford to splash out. Not until after Christmas.” Her companion answered: “Get Sammy to take you. He’s never short of money.”

Naked, I crouched below the window. Suddenly, the neon changed to a dazzling white before the signs and advertisements exploded. I heard the women laughing. I wanted to warn them of the danger. As the smoke cleared, a gigantic, advertisement began to lose its lettering. One by one the letters fell off. Quietly, with a faintest of sounds, as if they were falling into water, far below.

“Don’t you understand?” Dora spoke, softly, as if she knew that the world, even in nightmares, had eavesdroppers, “Don’t you follow? He’s the *point* of my Christmas decorations. He’s my *STAR!*” The other woman coughed and said, unpleasantly, “You can’t get to the bottom of him. He’s just plain *murky*.”

I stood up and leaned out of the window. I felt very angry at the woman disparaging my character. To calm myself, I counted the windows on the featureless, building opposite. I was on the thirty-second, floor above ground level. Where in all this space (my first question of the dream) was Dora? I had heard her voice so clearly. And this Dora clearly had some surprise in store for me.