

In Her Own Words

by Elizabeth Argall

'I went out to the hazel wood, because a fire was in my head...'

She left him. After all that had happened, she left him. A moment of clarity, of sadness. The quiet click of the latch, signifying everything, the first sound of a terrifying new future.

She walked down the footpath, a precisely bricked line bisecting the lawn. In front of her, a hedge of roses, the blossoms overblown, petals falling to the ground. For any other life this walk would mean nothing, one careless step following the other, but today, from this house, on this day, this seemingly normal act meant everything.

Mrs John Carrigan smiles and waves. Vanessa nods her head politely in return. *'She doesn't know, Mrs Carrigan doesn't know. She doesn't see, how is it she cannot see? I am doing the most important, most terrifying thing I have ever done. And she keeps pruning her azaleas.'* She half expects Mrs Carrigan to try to stop her, condemn her. But that will happen later, when the news gets out.

The gossip will spread, a ripple of increasing magnitude and elaboration. Mrs Carrigan will say, "I saw her on that morning, I knew there was something strange going on, she had a look about her, shifty, you know... but there was always something strange about that girl, how was I to know it was any different? I don't know why Stephen married her in the first place, a nice young man like that, throwing himself away on such a dubious proposition – you know her mother was just the same, strange creature, drowned herself when Vanessa was young, hardly the sort of girl you would imagine Stephen with, he deserves so much better, but looks will turn a man's head and rip away all sense. Not that Vanessa's that attractive mind you, too skinny to my taste, but some men seem to have a weakness for that frail washed out look. Poor Stephen was silly to ever hook up with her,

but the damn cheek of Vanessa, to leave him like that, no explanation, nothing! Talk about the ingratitude, after all he's given her and this is her thanks? Good riddance to bad rubbish is all I can say ..." and Mrs Carrigan wouldn't stop speaking there; in Vanessa's mind Mrs John Carrigan talks on and on, a litany of judgement and prejudice. In the physical world Mrs Carrigan continues to clip her azaleas.

Vanessa wonders if part of Mrs Carrigan would rejoice at Vanessa's freedom, feel an ancient stirring of her own to be free, to have wings... did Mrs Carrigan ever have wings? Was Mrs John Carrigan once young and beautiful and admired by many? It seems unimaginable and threateningly true, surely things of beauty stay forever, they never turn into Mrs John Carrigan. Vanessa wonders what creature lurks beneath the skin of Mrs Carrigan, what dreams could paint her sides in crimson and gold and make her eyes spark like silver. "I don't know" thinks Vanessa "I don't know her well enough. We have been neighbours for seven years and I know nothing of her soul, her heart's desire, her illicit wants hiding underneath a plaid housecoat and gardening gloves."

Vanessa Roberts pulls her coat around her and rubs her thumb over the canvas shopping bags. Her entire world - no her entire future held in two shopping bags and the vague hope of something more *out there*. She opens the little front gate and clicks it shut behind her. She takes one last look at the house, her house, their house, her refuge, her cage. She brushes the roses with her hands, feels them fall through her fingers and onto the ground.

"Goodbye house," she whispers. She fights back a jolt of sadness that kicks her hard in the throat.

And she walks, walks down the street. Turns the corner, flickers her eyes over the greengrocers and the general store, she thinks she will never see them again and impending nostalgia kicks her hard in the throat once again. "Not yet, not yet," she whispers to herself, she has not left and already she feels a burning empty place where this landscape should be. All that was ugly has a sudden beauty.

She walks past straggling, struggling elm trees, newly planted, their skinny bodies and long nodding heads cradled by pickets and thick string. She walks past the playground. The little ones must be having lunch as swarms of children clamber over metal frames, girls playing at hopscotch, skipping ropes and cats cradle juxtapose themselves against the rowdier games of the boys.

Vanessa thinks of where Stephen is now; sitting behind his big old desk, the ceiling fan slowly rotating, his fountain pen scratching away, a steady rhythm of letters, interrupted now by the tea lady, yes she'll be coming by any minute now. He'll have tea, two sugars, no milk and perhaps a biscuit if they have the right sort. He's sitting there, at peace, drinking tea and eating a biscuit, he will return to what he is doing with the same steady detachment with which he does everything and he won't know. He will sit there, doing nothing, thinking today is an ordinary day, when it is far from ordinary and she has already left him.

She imagines Stephen returning home. He won't see the note initially, he'll wander around a little, check in the bedroom, peek out into the backyard, become concerned and check in the bathroom, feel a moment of relief that she's not lying there, head resting against the bathtub, staining the tiles with her flesh. But his relief will be momentary as he returns to the search and cannot find her anywhere. He knows her well enough to know she wouldn't be visiting neighbours, but he might check anyway. Mrs Carrigan will tell him that she saw Vanessa go out just after eleven, "thought she was going shopping," she'll say in a syrupy voice and enquire after Stephen's health, every word a judgment on Vanessa.

He will return to the house, puzzled, a little relieved perhaps? She's not sure, he might be even more worried. He'll feel thirsty and go to the fridge for a drink and then he will see the note. He'll pick it up in his hands and sit down, he'll turn the paper over, and over and over, looking for more words, but he'll find none. He'll gaze at the note in dumb, mute incomprehension and wait for the universe to unwrite its mistakes. He'll sit there for

what seems like fifty years, he might cry a little, she's not sure, she doesn't know him well enough, not really. And after what seems like fifty years he'll get up, he'll have a glass of water. He'll go outside and prune the flowers, cutting off the dead heads, roses past their time falling to the ground. He'll attend to the car, trim the lawn and oil the hinges of the back door until it gets dark. Then he'll go inside, fry himself some sausages, he'll read his book and go to bed. She wonders how he will feel when he turns out the light, when the world is reduced to darkness and the space beside him will never be filled by her again. She wonders what he will think, will he be sad? Will he be relieved? Will he feel nothing at all? After everything they've been through, after everything that's happened, she doesn't know him well enough to know.

She walks on past the children's playground, thinking of the note, her simple thoughtless looking note "I have gone, I will not return." Those words took so long to write, pieced together and found after pages of hurt, of gratitude, pages of anger. Explanations, dozens of explanations and none of them the same, so self contradictory, finding herself drowning in her own words, riding roller coasters of guilt, hurt, resentment, desire, her sense of loss returning again and again. Who is this person who writes this note? Struggling for clarity, for consistency a note that would explain herself to everyone, to him, to the gossiping neighbours... to herself. A note accurate in all ways, achieving balance, putting everything in, leaving nothing out – without overemphasising any element. And all the time in the back of her head, hating him, loving him, hating herself, loving herself, wanting there to be another way, but inevitably knowing there was not.

She would like to think that is why it took so long, took so long to leave... not out of fear of the unknown, a terror that rises within her, making every step away an act of will. Not the fear of the known, the recriminations, a world made all the more precarious to her precarious state of mind. Instead it was the note, yes, her inability to write the correct note – tell her story and speak her truth to him. Find the truth and give it to him like a precious jewel, an intangible sacrifice that would make everything ok. It was not until she saw the roses falling on the ground she realised that she had no truth. If she had a truth, if ever there could be a truth found in this place, in this house, with those walls that

held her and mocked her then she would not have to leave. When she realised futility of her desperate search she laughed, she packed her half truths in two shopping bags and left him a note, "I have gone, I will not return."

She stands at the train station, just another housewife going into the city for some shopping. She can almost imagine being one of them, she could just go into town, window shop, try on a few dresses and return home before the five o'clock rush. She could scrunch up the note, maybe make dinner, that would surprise him and pretend they were a normal husband and wife in their normal home eating their normal dinner. It's not too late whispers a voice in her head, just close your eyes and pretend it's real, lie back and call it reality, be the perfect wife and he will be the perfect husband and it will all be ok, you just have to wish it hard enough.

How long would the illusion hold? A week? A month? How long would it be until the cracks became crevices and she fell into darkness?

The train blows her hair about with wild abandon as it arrives, a tempestuous wind of change. She moves into its warm musty heat, the old creaking seats, the slightly damp elbow of the person next to her.

The train chortles, coughs and spits, the whistle blows and she moves without physical effort. She lets her mind rest for a while, feels the clack clack of the rails, feels the jolt and sway of corners. She loves trains. A train always knows where it is going, it follows a realm of patterns, clearly marked and gently guiding. She need not fear for her destiny for this moment, the train will do it for her, predestined stops, organised turns and slowings. The train is old and knows in its bones when to slow, when to grind and push hard, a train is a graceful dragon of the future and of the mythical past.

She hates buses. Buses deceive. Buses change their minds. There is no clear path for a bus. Bucketed by the elements, by whims of the driver and other cars. Buses have a secret language, their patterns hold no public beauty, instead they hide their paths on

masonic pieces of paper that flutter and change, revealing their secrets only to the initiated. A train station is a node of beauty, a place of contemplation and change, at a station there is flux and flow, a thousand dreams gently merging among luggage, tickets and the station snack bar. A bus stop is a sad flag, a line scraped in the sand, a scraggling post to stand at and wait to move from one place to another. Buses hold no dreams, they hold uncertainty and terror. Random and chaotic they do not hold the order, the precision and deliberation of trains. Buses are thoughtless and suck away meaning, so she feels. When boarding a bus the terror rises, standing at this temporary point in space she is acutely aware of the vacuum, the nothingness that could rise up and swallow her whole.

It is no wonder she caught the train on her journey to personhood.