

Caryl Lewis

The Cage

The heat stood around him heavy and threatening and pressed its hands over his face. He woke, his shirt thin with sweat. He let his bare feet drop from the top of the desk and rubbed his neck in confusion. Pulling at his collar, he noticed that it was already undone to his navel. Pushing his chair backwards, he walked slowly to the open window. A mature afternoon sprawled in the treetops and humming birds jerked and darted between boughs. He rubbed his eyes as the air rolled in waves across the scratch of cleared ground in the forest. He pulled at one of the broad leaves around the window and pressed it to his face feeling its cool palm warming against his skin.

Months had passed. He hadn't seen anyone much. His beard had outgrown its itchiness and was now soft and long. There wasn't much point in washing as the sweat pushed through his pores before he had even finished. He had eaten very little and slept even less in his humid enclosure. His only company was the startlingly coloured bird that sat in the cage on the verandah, and Vania who bought food occasionally and then left to start her walk home. When he'd asked her about the bird she had said that it had always been there, ever since she was a little girl. She had laughed and pulled at her dull grey corn rows, wishing that everything so old could stay so colourful. Every time she left, her laughter receding, everything seemed quieter and his own voice sounded clumsy as he talked to the bird whilst pushing hard shiny seeds through the cage. He turned and looked at the desk in the sparse wooden room. The sheets of white paper lay empty on the desktop like broken wings. He had words

and thoughts humming in his head like flies but the sheets of paper lay dead however hard he tried to provoke them with his pen. His lungs filled with air thick as water. They'd all be waiting for the book. Panting, eager as blotting paper, ready to absorb it all but he was too hot to sleep, too hot to eat and too hot to write.

He walked the floorboards and was pulled towards the kitchen at the back of the house. He pulled a fat mango from a wooden box. Its flesh was heavy and cool and he pressed its perfume to his nose. He squeezed it between his fingers, the skin glistening healthily in the soft light. He hadn't eaten for days. He and Maria used to eat mangoes. He thought of her as he pulled his sharpened paper knife through the flesh. Its juice covered his fingers in honey tones. He shut his eyes and thought of her legs, her weight on his chest and her skin. He pressed his lips to the fruit. It tasted of water. He opened his eyes suddenly and, disappointed, threw the hard-hearted fruit to the corner of the room with a damp thud. It was getting dark and the frogs were beginning to stir their strange songs into the night. The air would soften at this break between night and day, and the deep earth would cool and smell of warm biscuit. He went to lie on the dirty mattress on the floor by his desk and lay longing for sleep. He felt his fingers still sticky sweet as he rubbed the salty sweat from his face. Sleep came in fits and his body plucked and jolted as he lay. He opened his eyes. He heard the sound again. The moon was choked by black clouds and he couldn't breathe. The frogs were quiet. It was pitch dark. He sat up. He heard the noise again. Creaking wood. Fear sharpened his hearing and his pupils widened. He got up and stood still. Listening. He felt for the loop of his pocket and the hardness of his knife. The creaking was louder this time like someone gaining confidence with

each step. His heart tightened. He had been warned. The old man who had given him the key had smiled crookedly and said that it was a lonely place. Chuckling, he had dangled the key above his palm, telling him that there were some people about that would steal the clothes from your back and when they were gone, they'd steal your soul. He had dreamt of them for weeks, their faces appearing from the trees in the dark. Eyes and knives gleaming. The small sound of wood screeching. He turned his head to listen. His empty stomach ached and a damp sweat flashed down his spine. He had to move. Slowly, he walked on his toes towards the window, not breathing. His ankles rolled quietly with each step. He had walked that path for weeks and knew that six steps should get him to the open window. He felt the window pane and stood with his back to the wall. His breath pressed on his ribs. He tried to control his lungs but his head felt light. He pushed himself against the wall, trying to make himself small. Suddenly, the sky cleared its throat and the thunder rolled out across the tops of the trees. His whole body convulsed. The breeze strengthened, and the leaves by the window started to whisper louder.

'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.'

He pulled his body into himself and stood still as ice. His heart was painful in his flesh. A laugh. Perhaps there were two of them. It was a game. Sport. Probably not even in this world after chewing plants, smoking leaves.

'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.'

He pressed his thumb against the blade of his knife. He hooked one hand on the window frame. He swallowed hard.

'Ha, ha, ha.'

The whole room was lit with silver light. He jumped, and let out a small

cry. The light clicked off and the heavy thunder threatened the land. He pressed his hands to his mouth. They must have heard him. The hairs on his arms were upright and his legs had become springy and fast with nerves. He tasted the electricity in the air around him before another shake of the sky. His whole body ached. The creaking had stopped. They were re-grouping. The room lit up once again as the air crackled. Perhaps they would come in around the back of the house. The sound of thunder like paper ripping. The doors couldn't be locked. He usually pushed an old wardrobe in front of the kitchen passage but he hadn't had the strength lately to move anything. He had let himself become vulnerable. He was nothing but quarry. Nothing but soft flesh flitting in a hard wooden box.

'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!'

The sound of feet moving. He could see them now. White eyes wide with wonder. Looking at his red flesh and his blood dripping between the floorboards like mango juice. Warm, congealing then dark. No one would find him for days.

He would have to confront them. He would have to plunge his knife into their soft bodies. He would have to scrape their bones and snap their sinews. The sky growled and the light flashed across the house. Lightning fell like sharpened teeth.

'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha...'

Then came the sound of moaning and whispering. The leaves flapped in the rising wind. He would have to wait. Wait for the lightning and then strike. Wait for the light. He softened his knees in anticipation.

'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha....'

The fear had poisoned his blood and his hand became eager. Eager

to jump through the window to kill before getting killed. To feel bones through the knife handle, to push the blade hard until his hand made contact with the skin. He'd have to surprise them to stand a chance. Kill one and let his body slump before stalking the other. Sticky blood on fingers. He'd have to count. Count the time between the thunder and the lightning. It was getting closer already. He would count and then jump when he knew there'd be light. He would have to rely on the light.

There was whispering. Louder this time. He waited with every muscle in his body pulled tight. The sound of feet creeping. All the thoughts that he'd ever thought had vanished. The past, the future didn't matter anymore. He could smell their blood. He was pulled, ready to strike in the darkness. His nostrils flared to feed him more air. His wide eyes stared, flitting between sounds. Lightning. He started counting. His mind bending over the numbers.

'One, two three.' FLASH.

He grabbed the side of the window and gauged where he would need to jump.

Whispering and laughing. The sounds were louder still. Thunder.

'One, two, three.' FLASH.

It was clear as day for a second. Thunder rolling. His legs were ready, his shoulders tight and shivering. Thunder. Laughter filled the verandah.

'One, two...'

He leaped out of the window and landed heavily on the wood the other side. He let out a scream, a scream that came from deep inside him, an old scream that he didn't even know was there. FLASH. Terrified, he looked around. His eyes white in the cold silver light, he darted his head

from side to side. The light died. There was no one there. He turned in a circle, his knife slashing blindly. He stabbed the air screaming, and turned and screamed and cried as the thunder laughed over the house. He fought and brawled until his arms ached and his heart had almost finished. He lunged and hit viciously, baring his teeth with fire in his eyes. The knife was pressed so hard to his palm that it had become part of him. Then he gave up, his strength sapped by fear. He hadn't eaten, he hadn't slept. He stared into the darkness, his chest heaving and waited to be killed. His breathing slowed and he became aware of his senses once again. He waited for the piercing knife, but it never came. He looked around blindly, but no one came. Then, from the absolute darkness came a childish little voice.

'Hello, hello, hello, hello... ha, ha, ha, ha.'

He stood staring. He could hear footsteps pacing. The trees creaking. He stepped forward and his footstep came back to him in an echo.

'Hello?' he asked the darkness.

'Hello?' came the reply.

'Who's there?' he asked again.

'Ha! ha! ha!' The sky became light once again and the whole world lit up.

The bird stared at him, his head askew through the rusty bars of the cage.

'Hello, hello, hello, hello, ha! ha! ha! ha!'

The electricity ran from his body like water and his heart contracted in relief. His shoulders slackened and he let the knife fall heavily to the floor.

He heard it bounce away in the darkness. He stared and listened to the little bird and let his fear drip through the floorboards to the earth below.

He started to laugh. Laugh after laugh rose within him and flashed out into the darkness. And as each one fell metallic across the verandah, the

clouds shifted and revealed a watery moon. Drops of rain began to fall fat and healthy into the grateful hands of the leaves around the house.

'Ha! ha! ha! ha!'

The bird echoed his laughter. It had learned over the years. Listening and copying. Listening and copying until it had found its voice. It would never be able to tell the truth, to recite an original story, but it had learnt enough to laugh. Fascinated, he walked towards the little captive and looked through the ugly bars. He leant down near its eyes and reached up to open the cage. The bird watched his every move in the weak light and creaked back to him as the metal hinges squeaked. It looked the man in the eye before hopping to the side of the cage. Cautiously, the bird put his head out of the little door as if trying to remember how to fly. Their heads came close as the bird stretched its weak wings. The man felt the relief of being close to another living thing.

As a dark cloud covered the moon once again, he heard it go. The flutter of wings passed by him as it opened its body to the refreshing rain.

After standing on the verandah for a while, he turned and made his way to the kitchen. He lit a candle and watched its flame choke then gain confidence. And as the rain chattered on the tin roof he drank his fill of clean sweet water and ate fruit with his hands. He felt the air thinning around him and the vicious heat losing its grip. He washed his face in a basin and rubbed it dry with a towel. He felt his way back to the small mattress to sleep. As the clouds dissipated, the room became lighter and he fell asleep watching the white petals of paper bloom in the clear dawn light.

He slept for hours, every knot in his body unravelling. His nerves slackened and his skin dried. When he woke, he watched the light blue

rays for a while and smelt the evaporating rain. He got up and made some bitter coffee. He went out, as he did every morning to the verandah. There were still some seeds in his pocket. The door of the cage was open. He felt his heart lurch as he looked at the small empty space. He moved closer when something caught his eye. He put down his coffee and bent over the cage. At the bottom, there was a coloured feather, daring amidst the grey waste and seed husks. He put his hand through the little door and took hold of it. It was made of every colour and its spine was flexible and strong. He looked around. It was getting hotter, but the scalding heat was gone. He remembered the knife and bent to pick it up. Feeling a light breeze on his face, he looked at the gift and pressed his knife blade into its base to make a point. He smiled. There was laughter in the trees around him.

He turned his back and slowly walked to his desk, pulling a blanket around his shoulders as he went. He sat and shuffled his papers for a while before plunging the tip of the feather into a pot of ink. Smiling, he listened to the songs of the birds in the trees before scratching some colour onto one white wing.