

CASSIO DREAMING

*give him defense against the elements  
for I have lost him on a dangerous sea  
– Othello, Act II.1*

Possums are taking over this house. They respect it no more than a tree, a midnight expressway from one staging point to the next. They have less respect for verticals than horizontals. Verticals have no choice; they have to hold still as possums sink in their claws and scuttle up through the night air. But horizontals sometimes give way. And cats are known to crouch in their treacherous corners. One false move and you're jelly meat on the platter. The wavy plastic roof covering the back deck breaks the possums' fall from the overhanging silk tree, which gets slippery at precisely 5.30 every night. When the first crash comes I know it's time to pop the stuffed veal in the oven and put on the rice if I want to be finished in time for our evening performance.

More punctures from possum feet are appearing in the roof every day, but this isn't my problem. I'm only renting, you see. For what I need this place is just fine. The busy street at the front door wakes me by six every morning, so I have plenty of time for my yoga meditation and exercises. It only takes a few minutes staring at the flame for me to quell the traffic sounds and reaffirm how transitory external things really are. I run through my Wagner arias after breakfast and pretend the rush hour is an orchestral back-up, which helps my concentration. The crescendo of a petrol truck climbing to the top of the hill has an Aryan immediacy my cheap stereo never seems to inspire even at full volume. Best of all, I've yet to hear a complaint from the neighbours.

The house is low-maintenance, too. Nothing to mow out front because most of the ground is covered with this Old World red brick, sort of like an Italian piazza. There's even a goldfish pond, minus the fish, in the raised flower bed over by the fence. When I came by to check out the place the first time I could have sworn I saw a naked terra cotta figure with water spurting out of its mouth and fingers braced at one corner of the pond, but the landlord must have removed it on the chance I'd go crazy

over a televised soccer match one afternoon and hurl a beer can at it. Without a fountain or fish, the pond's gone stagnant and would be a breeding ground for mosquitoes if I didn't occasionally siphon out the muck with a spare length of hose. There are lights built in around the perimeter and they cast a eerie glow over everything at night. Like the graveyard scene from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Of course, the possums prefer the less ordered back yard. It's a tangle of ferns, gum trees and mangoes — a jungle gym if you're game. While dinner is cooking, I sometimes switch on the floodlight and take a mug of tea out on the deck to enjoy the acrobatics. Possums have no inhibitions, and they leap between branches as if gravity were irrelevant. When I try to imitate the chattering, gargling sound they make to each other, they narrow their eyes and shake their heads as if I've failed an audition. I may have a lease but I'm certainly not in charge here — I'm only a vertical.

Up until now, women have come and gone in my life like operatic seasons. It's hard to meet people outside the musical scene, those for whom a year is a routine, flowing smoothly from one day to the next. I lived with a woman like that once. I thought her work as a financial controller would help check my extravagant spending habits, but she left after she realised my energies would always have to be divided between her and my music. So I find it easier to stick with the herd and pair off now and then when the feelings seem right. There's usually someone of like mind on those nights when you don't want to sleep alone. If a relationship develops, I try to sustain the peak as long as I can, but I know the lights must come up at the end no matter how many curtain calls there have been. There's no point in fighting it.

I thought my new place would be an ideal 'pad' for love-making, but that was before Judy, a promising soprano with waist-length curly brown hair, heard the thumping under the house when we were in bed.

"What's that, Michael?" she said, grabbing me by the hips so I'd stop to listen.

I hadn't noticed it before. "The bed?"

She screwed up her face. "Waterbeds don't make sounds like that. Listen — there it is again!"

I wasn't about to jump up just to track down the noise. We tried to ignore it but the thumping set up such a syncopation with my love thrusts that I couldn't come and the night was nearly a disaster. I dreamt

the possums smashed through a window, raided the fridge for fruit and then banged out Leopold Mozart's *Toy Symphony* on the pots and pans. I woke up with a start when the 5.45 bus roared by. Though I listened for the sound it had gone.

"I reckon it was possums last night," I said over toast and tea.

"Don't they prefer heights?" Judy said. "Like attics and that sort of thing?"

"Possums have a three octave range. They can sing any part that's up — or down — for grabs."

After she left I went under the house. There were no scratchings or droppings on the ground. No old boots hanging by their laces or loose boards that could bang against the stumps in a breeze. Nothing. I was determined to find out what had made the noise. I brought home a torch from back stage after closing performance of *The Flying Dutchman* and left it by the bed so I could race down under the house if the thumping started again. But it didn't, not that night or the next three nights. I had to take the torch back on Friday because someone had missed it, and that evening Judy and I went out for coffee to celebrate Wagner's demise.

"So how's the haunted house?" she asked.

"My house is not haunted," I snapped. "I haven't heard a thing since the night you stayed over."

"I'm a jinx, am I?"

"A *minx*, perhaps, but not a jinx. Maybe we were going at it so wantonly that the floorboards decided to register a protest."

"That's not how *I* remember it," she laughed. "But I love a good mystery — or a good man who's read one — so why don't we try again?"

It was raining by the time we got back to my place, a good omen. Since possums are usually more subdued during wet weather, I hoped the thumpers would take a rain check for the night. Yet, as I lay in bed watching Judy undress, I felt my confidence drain away. After all, what would stop them from seeking shelter under the house?

"Let's give the ghosts something to crunch their bones about!" she said, slipping in beside me and giving me a wet kiss on the neck.

I kissed her shoulder and then paused. "But ghosts don't have bones, Judy."

"They must have *something* to get our attention!"

The outdoors stayed quiet as a tomb until I was inside her and then the thumping started again, softly at first, and gradually louder as we

went to it. I tried to keep my mind on Judy's wonderful body, and when that didn't work I conjured up other women dripping with sensuality — anything to keep my cock firm. But the noise kept distracting me.

"That's it!" I cried, throwing the covers off. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this!"

"I wouldn't go out like that, if I were you," she said, shaking with laughter. "The goblins might be gay!"

I had to wait until my eyes had adjusted to the darkness before I went outside. The open spiral set of stairs down from the deck to ground level seemed even more flimsy than in the daylight as I clung to the rail making my way down. I had to stumble through the laundry area first. By then I could make out certain familiar shapes. There was the trusty washing machine with its lid upraised. I imagined a mouth frozen in a voiceless scream. And the hot water tank, behind which at least one assassin could be concealed. As I manoeuvred my way through the maze of packing boxes, rolls of spare carpet, and the abandoned wood stove, I nearly forgot to duck my head at the point where the ground slopes up sharply to the crawl space under the bedroom. As I did a shadowy floor beam slightly grazed my head. By the time I reached the bedroom area, however, I couldn't see or hear anything. There wasn't a whiff of possum.

"The ghosts might be unfriendly," Judy said the next morning. "Maybe you should leave the place to them and move in with me."

"I signed a lease, Judy. They've got my bond."

"You could always sell your waterbed. I prefer something harder anyway, if you get my meaning."

"Sorry about that."

I felt a tactical withdrawal from Judy would do my ego good at that point, especially after another soprano reported that she was mucking around with a visiting Italian tenor on the side. Legend had it that he would burst into Puccini love songs to forestall his orgasms — the very antithesis of my situation — so I decided to farm among other pastures for a while.

Unfortunately the thumping didn't go away with Judy; if anything it got more and more regular. But it had to be at night, when I was in bed. There would be nothing while I was getting undressed, setting the alarm, skimming over my lines for the next morning's rehearsal. Nothing until I turned off the light and had gone through my deep breathing exercises. Nothing until images of Judy, or some new woman I

was thinking about, forced their way into my mind. Then it would start: the now-familiar sound of rapping on timber, not an unkind or insistent sound, but one that echoed, resonated, in my head as if it were trying to draw me inside to hear messages I'd been ignoring up until then.

I still put it down to the possums. I read somewhere that they get a sweet tooth for houses, especially old Queenslanders, with all those discordant nooks and crannies. Once they nest in shredded insulation or sawdust there's no getting rid of them, short of traps and toxins. They were expanding their range as Spring came on. Thundering across the roof, scampering down the outer walls, even pattering along the window ledges. The night I heard scratching above the ceiling I knew they'd infiltrated the attic, too. So why should the crawl space be out-of-bounds?

Still, I would have left it at that if they hadn't started waking me in the middle of the night. The first time it sounded like a *grand prix* eclipsing above my head. I looked at the clock, thinking I'd just fallen asleep but it was 3 a.m. Half-conscious, I imagined possums swerving out of control, tripping over electrical cables, crashing into trusses, bursting into flame. I yelled, pounded on the wall, but they ignored me. Then, just as I was about to give up ever getting back to sleep, it went all quiet, as if one of them had waved a checkered flag. Time out for a Devonshire Tea?

I called the landlord next day.

"You're not trying to get out of your lease, are you?" he said.

"Did I say that? I was just wondering if anything could be done about the possums."

"We could *poison* them, I suppose."

I could tell by his tone that he was laying a trap for me. "Oh, no," I said. "They're kind of cute — when they keep to their curfew. Isn't there something a bit less drastic that we could do?"

"We could plant a few cane toads in the attic."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Sorry, Mike. you have to be a Queenslander to get that one."

It wasn't going to be easy to inspire him to action, so I decided to escalate. "There's something under the house, too."

"White ants?"

"Not unless they're armed. I hear this thumping, you see."

"Oh, that. It's nothing."

I waited. "Nothing? As in ghost-nothing, or nothing at all?"

"No. I should have told you about Mrs Dagleish and her cane."

It was like saying *I should have told you about the body decomposing in the coal bin*. I didn't know which question to ask first. I suspected Mrs Dagleish must be a neighbour, but why she would be traipsing under my house in the middle of the night was beyond me.

"She doesn't like cats," the landlord explained. "So when they come up on her veranda she scares them away by pounding the floor with her cane. The sound carries, you see."

"I hear this noise under my bed. I can feel the vibrations."

"Impossible. you wouldn't feel them that far away."

"My point precisely."

Thanks to the lease it appeared I was going to have to endure the possums and Mrs Dagleish's magical cane (or whatever it was) for the next five months. There are few moments when I feel like climbing on the mortgage merry-go-round, but that was one of them.

*Otello* was just around the corner, so I knew if I didn't do something dramatic to get a better night's sleep I'd end up with worse bloodshot eyes than the hero. I went to the chemist and picked up a few packets of those soft earplugs, the kind that expand after you stick them in. I wanted to avoid complaining to the neighbours about noise lest the sword be turned back on me for my singing. For a few nights, things were fairly quiet. The possums woke me up only once after what must have been a head-on collision between two of them that shook a slice of plaster free from the ceiling to shatter on the floor beside the bed, after which I was sure I heard squeals of delight. Other than that, I slept pretty well.

I found the pickings rather slim among the altos. A reputation's a funny thing — one day you have an aura that somehow attracts women, then, inexplicably, it's gone. I was tempted to make it up with Judy once I heard the Italian tenor had shipped out to Toronto the week before for a secondary part in *Don Giovanni*. As if she'd been reading my thoughts, she was to understudy Desdemona and I'd landed a few meaty solo lines in the second act.

"Congratulations," I said. "With a bit of black magic Brünhilda will catch the flu and you'll be one!"

"You nasty man," she said, leading me out the door. "That's what comes living with the goblins — *I'd* never wish for such a thing"

"It's the green-eyed monster that's brought me down," I confessed, "not the goblins."

“You — jealous?” she cried. “I don’t believe it. With all those women lusting after you?”

“Idle gossip.”

“And what gossip have *you* been listening to, my lord?”

“Nothing much. Just about you and Salvadore.”

“Oh, him. He’s old enough to be my father.”

“That didn’t stop Otello.”

“Otello was a Moor, Michael. Italians wear out more quickly. Especially the tenors. Too much pasta, I think.”

“So you weren’t his little scampi?”

“He’s got a daughter my age. We’re both Libras. He used to read to her in bed. We had a few bottles of wine and he told me a few stories — like father and daughter.”

“What *kind* of stories?”

“Buy me a pizza, and I’ll tell all.”

From what she told me as we ate, Salvadore had kept it clean. And the tales he spun, of floods, battles, cannibals and hair-breath escapes, would have convinced my yogi he was a brother Grimm reincarnated. In the end I preferred to believe Judy, though it didn’t really matter whether she was telling the truth — who was I to be insisting on purity anyway?

I invited her back to the house, but we took a side trip through the Botanical Gardens on our way back to the bus and ended up making love — hurriedly, yet quite triumphantly — in the bushes. I guess we didn’t want to take any chances on the goblins.

I recognised Mrs Dagleish from her cane. She was peering over the chain-link fence as I kissed Judy good-bye the next morning, but I didn’t actually see her until Judy had gone through the gate. She was frail and unsteady on her feet, and I could see why she needed the cane. It was a rough hewn affair with a thick shaft.

“G’day,” I said, walking back to the house.

I wanted to leave it at that, but she gave the top of the fence a crisp smack with the hook of the cane just as I reached the door. “Young man,” she said. “Come over here.”

I could have walked inside, pretending I hadn’t heard her, but then I hesitated in the doorway, which gave her the chance to repeat herself, louder this time. “Young man. I want to have a word with you!”

She wasn’t blind but had the milky green pupils of someone whose sight is failing. Nevertheless, I could see she had probably been

quite a beauty in her day. She had high cheekbones and fine silver hair, and even now she had only a few wrinkles under her eyes and in the folds of skin along her neck. For some reason I imagined she'd been a dancer in her youth, a ballerina, perhaps.

"You must be Mrs Dagleish," I said, offering my hand over the fence. "I'm Michael."

She looked at it for a minute then shook it firmly. Her skin felt cool and paper-thin. "I must apologise," she said. "Mr Dagleish would always go round the first day new people moved in and invite them over for tea and cakes. But I haven't baked for years now."

"No need to apologise," I said. "I should have come over by now to introduce myself."

"But you're a singer aren't you?"

It sounded like she was offering me an excuse. "Why, yes. I guess you've heard me practising. I'm sorry if I've disturbed you."

"Not at all," she said, her lips trembling. "Mr Dagleish used to sing all the time. Bush ballads, mostly, but he'd always sit down with his glass of white wine to listen to the opera on Sunday afternoons after he'd finished in the garden."

"You must miss him."

"He's still here in a way. I kept a few clothes — his wedding shoes and suit, for instance. Things that no one else would wear for fear of bad luck. It comforts me to shine the leather or brush off the lint from a lapel because I feel him there. That's why I called you over."

I couldn't see what I had to do with it.

"That girl who was just here," she went on. "She's been here several times before, hasn't she?"

"Yes."

"You must like her, then."

"Why, yes, but--"

"So why do you let her go away?"

I turned red. "Well, for one thing she doesn't live here."

She shrugged. "Houses are meant for couples — or widows living with their memories. And this girl loves you."

It was not a question. "I think we're just friends. Mrs Dagleish."

"You don't love her?"

"I'm not sure about that."

"Wouldn't it be easier to love her if you knew she loved you?"

I cleared my throat. "Perhaps. But I still don't see—"

"I had to teach Mr Dagleish, too. Men know so little about love. It's always left up to a woman. Except so many women these days, they don't know their own mind, don't trust their feelings."

I couldn't argue with that, though she could have just as easily included men in her latter point. My meditation and exercises certainly brought me tranquillity but not many answers.

"How do you *know* she loves me, Mrs Dagleish?"

"I have a gift, you see. when I was younger people would come to me. Or rather I would go to their houses, where the energy currents are."

A new age woman before her time, I thought. Probably supplements her pension by smuggling in crystals on the side. "And you could tell when their energy currents, as you call them, were right for love?"

"Sometimes I was wrong about the men but never the women. Men are better at fooling themselves, but they're more transparent. You can tell all of that from the house, too."

"How?"

"It rebels," she said, "until the people in it cast away their dishonesty and bring back the equilibrium."

I would have dismissed all this as hogwash if I hadn't been thinking of the possums and the thumping on my floorboards. Maybe there *was* something to it. The possums were easy enough to analyse as raw emotions demanding some kind of resolution. But where did the thumping fit in?

"Speaking of equilibrium," I said. "Have you been bothered by cats lately?"

"No," she said, looking away. "There are no cats that I know of around here."

Judy came by for dinner that night, and after we'd had a few glasses of wine I decided to mention my chat with Mrs Dagleish.

"She's probably just lonely," she Judy. "I'm sure she doesn't mean any harm, Michael."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said. "She thinks you're in love with me," I said.

She flushed. "How did you get on to that topic?"

"*She* got on to it. I think she's a matchmaker of sorts."

She took a long sip of wine. "Well, what if she's right? Would that scare you away?"

It was my turn for a drink. "But what about our careers? What about 'the inevitability of us going our separate ways' — those were your words, not mine."

"That was weeks ago — and before we sorted out a few things in the bushes."

"So love comes down to sexual performance. Is that it?"

"Of course not, but it's not a bad indicator of how we really feel — at least for a woman. I know when I'm pretending. And I wasn't last night. Were you?"

"What do you take me for — Iago?"

She laughed. "No, I'd say you're more like yon Cassio, well-meaning but a bit ham-strung. Just the kind of chap fair Desdemona might have taken on if Otello hadn't run her through."

"Cassio had it easy. He didn't have possums dropping down around his ears every night."

"Well, if there's a tragedy coming on, maybe the best way for you to avoid the inevitable would be to sub-let."

"To the possums or the ghosts?"

"Once you're off-stage who cares?"

It was a magical night for us. The possums and ghosts were off on school holidays — or perhaps Mrs Dagleish had cast a friendly spell. After we turned off the lights, it was better than being in the bushes, too, because once it was clear we were on our own, there was no rush. Much later, I dreamt Otello's and Iago's chariot flipped over the way back from the front lines, crushing them under their soliloquies. When the gallant Cassio returned to break the news to Desdemona she collapsed in his arms. Only a kiss full on her lips, and then scent of his body close to her, could revive her. In the distance I heard ghosts softly thumping bones in applause and then, closer, the unmistakable sound of a possum crashing through acrylic.