

Whalesong

by Bruce Holland Rogers

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"I don't know why you expect me to get all weepy about it, Mother," Helen said into the phone. "It's not like David and I had an ideal marriage."

"Helen," her mother said, "the man is dead."

"And I'm sorry, just like I'd be sorry for any other stranger dying on the highway," Helen said. From the hallway bathroom came a high-pitched *Skyreeee? Skyreeee?*, and then a *Thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk*. Helen covered the receiver.

"Richard!" she called out. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing!"

"Well cut out whatever's making the funny noise."

"It's not me, Mom."

Helen uncovered the receiver. "Sorry. Richard was making some noise in the bathroom."

Her mother's voice said, "How are the kids taking it?"

"Pretty well. They cry some, and then they're O.K. We're all handling it like troopers."

"Helen, that's not natural."

"Oh, come on, Mother. He wasn't around much for them, either. It's hard to miss someone you hardly see."

"Listen to me," said her mother. "You're being awfully stony about this. You sound a lot like your father, just too reasonable and hard to be believed. And that's what finally killed him, you know."

"A heart attack is what killed him."

"Helen, I'm telling you, not matter how far apart you and David were, he was your husband for twelve years. You lived under the same roof...."

"Only in principle."

"What I'm saying," Helen's mother said, "is that it's not natural for you not to grieve even a little."

From the bathroom came *Skyreeee? Skyreeee?*, followed by a low, vibrating *Oooooooooooooomp*.

"Richard, cut it out!"

"I'm just washing my hands."

"Mother, I've got to go," Helen said, and hung up. Then, marching down the hall, she said, "Young man, when I'm on the phone I expect a little-"

"It wasn't me!" Richard said as she entered the bathroom.

"The pipes make noise when the water runs." He turned the faucet, and as the water ran, the bathroom filled with *Skyreeee? Skyreeee?*, and then *Thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk*. "See?"

"O.K.," Helen said. "Not guilty. Where's your sister?"

"I don't know."

"Well, find her and get her to set the table, and you pour drinks. I want water."

"Can I have Coke?"

"No, you cannot have Coke. You and Carissa can drink milk like you always do with dinner, and I wish you would stop asking. Now, go get your sister."

Richard's shoulders slumped as though some of his bones had suddenly vanished, and he sighed, "O.K."

"Don't you drag your feet," Helen said. "Scoot."

* * *

When Richard filled his mother's glass at the kitchen sink, the pipes said *Aaaawoooooot*, and then echoed *Ootootoot*.

"God, that's irritating," Helen said as she pulled the casserole from the oven.

"The toilet does it, too," said Carissa. "And the bathroom sink." She drummed on the table with two spoons.

"Do you want to go to your room?" Helen asked.

"No," Carissa said, still drumming.

"Then cool it and finish setting the table."

* * *

Helen had always been amazed at how long the kids could dawdle over loading the dishwasher. Tonight, after trying unsuccessfully to read the newspaper in the living room while they fought and carried one glass or one fork at a time from the table, she sent them to bed early and finished the job herself.

When she turned the appliance on, it sang a rising and falling *Aaaa-ank. Aaaaaa-ank.*

Aaaaaaaaaa-aaaaank.

"O.K.," she said. "That's enough!"

In the garage she opened David's toolbox, and as she touched the cool metal of the tools, she felt a tremor move from her hand and into her arm. She closed her eyes and said deliberately, "I will need a locking pliers and a pipe wrench and maybe a screwdriver," though she actually had little idea what she might need or what she might do with it.

Inside the house again, she heard Carissa calling her.

"What is it?" Helen said from the hall.

Long silence.

"What!"

"I want a drink of water."

"You're a big girl. You get a drink yourself, and then you get right back in bed. No dillydallying." She turned and walked toward the stairwell.

"Mom?"

"What now?"

Another long silence.

"Carissa, what?"

Again, silence, and Helen turned toward the basement stairs again.

As she started down, she felt strange, as though her limbs grew a little heavier with each step. The air felt thickened. Down. Down. Each step took longer than the one before it. Down. She became aware of the effort required to fill her lungs. There was a distant roaring sound, like the surf heard from afar. Each breath slow. Each step deliberate. From the bottom of the stairs, the light bulb at the top of the stairwell looked far away and shimmery. The basement air was damp. Helen put her forearm against the cold wall and took a long, slow breath. Just breathing in and breathing out was hard work.

Far away, she heard Carissa call, "Mom?" but she turned toward the utility room that lay beyond the rec room. Slow steps. Now, though, she no longer felt heavy. Instead, it was as though she were no heavier than the air, and she had to move slowly because with each step she had to concentrate on keeping her feet on the floor. She switched on the blue light over the pool table, and it seemed dimmer and bluer than she remembered it. Her hand felt the switch on the utility room wall, but no light came when she made it click several times with a hollow sound. She swam into the room with the murky blue light behind her.

The room stretched out farther in front of her than reason told her it could. She couldn't see the walls.

Two black immensities floated like zeppelins in the space in front of her, one a little larger than the other. Far away, as though through many walls of glass, she heard Carissa's feet on the floor above her. Whales, she saw in the dim light. They were whales. And when Carissa turned the faucet upstairs and the water began to flow in the pipes, the whales slowly turned their bodies toward the familiar sound, and the larger one cried, *Skyreeee? Aaaaaaa-ank*.

The smaller one answered, *Aaaaaa-ank. Thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk*. Then the water in the pipes stopped.

Helen looked at the tools in her hands. The metal was warm. She thought of David's hands on them, and then of her own hands in David's hands. Large hands, she remembered. When had he last held her hands in his, sheltering them, nesting them? So very long ago. How far she and David had drifted. Distantly, she heard Carissa returning to bed. Helen turned and started slowly away. She switched off the blue light. Slow, difficult steps. At the bottom of the stairs, she felt for a moment that she would float away on a black current, back into the darkness. But then she mounted the first step and felt a little better with each subsequent progression toward the yellow light and the air.

* * *

She woke before dawn, and started the coffee brewing. In her bathroom she saw David's tools lying on the counter. She picked up the screwdriver, and it felt hard and cold in her hand. She made herself laugh a short, uncertain laugh. Whales.

She stepped into the shower, and as the water began to fall, she heard *Skyreeee? Skyreeee?*, and an answering *Awooooooot. Thunk-thunk-thunk-thunk*. This time she couldn't make herself laugh. Instead she heard a sound come from inside her like air escaping, reluctantly, from a balloon. *Eeeeeee*. Short breath. *Eeeeeeee*. And then she managed a sob, and she began to add her own song to the song of the whales. She sang for the seas, for the ancient seas that surrounded us once, that carried our voices across such distances that no matter how far we drifted, we were never alone.

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