

STRANGWAYS GEORGE

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WRITER IN RESIDENCE

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Strangeways George was coming up the path at the front of the house, dragging his suitcase behind him. He had a bushy beard and a silly expression on his face; his nose and forehead were sunburnt from the long journey. Mother Crake was watching at the window. 'He's coming,' she hissed, and everyone got into position, all except Sister Cass who was pouring the lemony cake mix into a tin, next to the sink. The crate was there, in the middle of the kitchen. There were 6-foot walls, which were made up of thin silver bars, and a floor of rough carpet. The foolish delivery boy had set the crate up while Mother Crake was at work and Sister Cass, Brother Michael and Father Crake were digging potatoes outside. 'What in the hell has the boy done it there for?' they all said. The crate was supposed to be set up in the garden.

Mother Crake opened the door for Strangeways George, who hugged her and said, 'Oh, Ma,' and Sister Cass slammed the cake into the oven, edged around the crate to get into position.

Slim Boy didn't move, and Brother Michael hissed, 'Dog doesn't even know him,' and Father Crake nodded darkly. Slim Boy gazed into the distance with his milky brown eyes.

'Cass is making the lemon cake that you like,' Mother Crake said, shaking Strangeways George's embrace away, and Sister Cass grimaced; she'd had to get up at 4 am to fit her other tasks around making the lemon cake for Strangeways George.

Now Strangeways George was in the kitchen. 'It'll be a proper celebration,' he said, and then he gestured to the crate, stood behind the family, 'What's that crate?' he asked.

'That's for Slim Boy,' Father Crake said. 'The foolish delivery boy set it up in here, and now we can't get it out the door.'

Strangeways George was laughing; he shook his father's hand. 'I'll get in there, Pa. I'll help you out, once I've got my bearings,' he said. 'Got to get my bags unpacked.' He jiggled his old suitcase around, flaking and wrinkled leather.

'Ten years it's been,' Father Crake said, and Brother Michael said, 'Dog doesn't know you.' Strangeways George looked at his brother and reached over to push his lank brown hair back and

forth with his big hand. ‘You know me though,’ he said, his voice cracked. ‘You know me, don’t you, Michael?’

Brother Michael nodded but kept his eyes narrowed. ‘You’ll want to sleep in my room, I guess,’ Michael said. Slim Boy came and rested his big furred head on Michael’s knee.

The lemon cake started to smell good, and the family all sat down at the table and drank tea. They all looked at Strangeways George, taking him in.

‘I’ve been dreaming of this moment since you don’t know when,’ Strangeways George said, his teacup shaking a little in his big hand.

‘Since ten years, I expect,’ Mother Crake said, not unkindly.

The crate lurked behind the family; the door on the other side could only be seen through the bars.

‘It’s a big crate,’ Strangeways George said. ‘What’s the dog doing, to need a crate all of a sudden?’

The family were silent.

Sister Cass got up from the table and went around the crate to the oven, to get the lemon cake out. Strangeways George watched her, on the other side of the bars.

‘I’ve been dreaming about that cake,’ Strangeways George said, ‘since you don’t know when.’ Sister Cass smiled thinly. Her arms were muscular from work in the garden. She came and put the hot lemon cake on the table.

‘It’s not what he’s doing,’ Sister Cass said, standing behind Strangeways George, ‘It’s what he’s done.’

Strangeways George nodded. ‘Bad dog,’ he scolded, wagging his finger, ‘been at Ma’s cushions again.’ He laughed. ‘This looks delicious, Cass,’ he added.

The cake was on the table, bare and brown, thin horns of lemon peel sticking through the surface here and there. Strangeways George sniffed deeply at the steam rising from the cake.

‘You can have a slice,’ said Brother Michael. They all watched Strangeways George cutting the bitter cake with the knife, raising it to his chapped mouth, saying ‘Oh, that’s good.’ He closed his eyes in pleasure, and then slumped down in his chair. The suitcase fell onto its side with a crash.

At midnight, Strangeways George opened his eyes again. He had been dreaming deeply. The prison clock was ticking; it was almost pitch black, but while he writhed on his scratchy bed, the moon came from behind a cloud and illuminated the silver bars brightly. There was growling and sniffing coming from another cell, a slim body tossing around in the purgatory of light sleep.

Strangeways George scratched his beard - it was tickling him - and his hand came out holding a crumb that must’ve come from dinner. Strangeways George held the crumb between his chapped lips - his face was hot, he realised - and then he tasted what was there. That was odd, thought Strangeways George, that crumb of canteen grub tasted a little like his sister’s lemon cake – the cake that he had been dreaming of for near on ten years. Strangeways George lurched up, out of his blankets, and staggered towards the edge of the crate - he thought he could see his childhood dog, Slim Boy; he looked to be out there in the kitchen, teeth flashing, and milky eyes in the moonlight.