

Let Me Count The Ways My Dear, Let Me Count The Ways

By Anna Russell

I

Nobody knew when she had stopped speaking, or if indeed she had ever started. Nor was it known whether she couldn't or simply *wouldn't* talk (perhaps *simply* is a poor word choice for an affliction such as this, but anyway...), however, the fact remained that no words ever danced, jumped, fell or otherwise from her lips.

Truth be told, there was no-one around to care much.

Her journey from the womb to the halfway house we join her in must have been quite some tale – from the young mother with “problems” (always said in an exaggerated whisper with a faux-sympathetic shake of the head) to the myriad social workers and foster parents ranging from the underpaid and bemused to the creeping into her bedroom after lights out and knowing she would never tell. *Could* never tell? Either way.

Keeping her Off The Streets seemed to be the minimum requirement of the state – the state in question largely consisting of several ill-conceived acts of parliament and generous handfuls of the aforementioned underpaid and bemused – and so it was done.

It occurred to none along the way that a child who did not speak might need to learn how to read and write.

But *that* story is lost to the jaws of Time now.

This story, however, is not. *This* story may have begun at the very Beginning of Things, but that is all by-the-by – we can follow it quite well from here.

Her name is Sarah. His is Fred.

One of them loves the other.

Oh, and, somebody dies.

II

Nobody knew why Fred couldn't tell a lie. Couldn't or *wouldn't*? Definitely couldn't. There were no Jim Carrey-esque facial contortions; the truth just happened when he answered questions. Oh, how he wished it was otherwise. When innocuous “How-are-you?” were frequently greeted with replies such as “My anus is itching”, and “I want to come on your face” (the latter said to the large breasted and totally unsuspecting young woman who was in the process of serving him a slice of smoked ham and two mini macaroni pies from the delicatessen counter at Safeway), it would be only natural to assume that Fred wished he could lie at least a little bit.

But it was not to be.

Fred delivered food to Sarah. Twice a day, lunch and dinner; drab and gloopy concoctions designed to fulfil, much like her room at the halfway house, those ubiquitous minimum requirements. She ate in a perfectly ordinary manner – chew,

swallow, repeat – but to Fred, each bite she took sent his heart soaring and the Cliché Quota of the World™ into overdrive.

Fred's friends were virtually non-existent, his social life snoring in the same spot as his still intact virginity – the delicate intricacies and potential pitfalls of playing the sexual field were magnified beyond belief when “Do you think I'm pretty?” was answered with “Yes, that's why I have a semi” or “Not really, but I'm desperate to have sex and you looked like you might be grateful for the attention”.

Fred had learned not to talk to too many people.

Sarah, on the other hand, did not ask Fred any questions. Nor did she attempt to communicate with him in any manner. She merely sat on her battered chair and ate as Fred watched, occasionally telling her about his day and his thoughts. He could do this without having to worry about the truth falling out of him, but he noticed that when he was around her, it never occurred to him to lie.

Sarah, to Fred, was a Very Perfect Thing.

III

Fred had urinated all over Mrs Macpherson's peonies one Wednesday night, then meowed like a cat at her when she came marching out the door. Mrs Macpherson is Fred's downstairs and, at the current time, only neighbour. Fred, it has to be said, is not a bad man, and given the dull existence his affliction and, more to the point, embarrassment over it has forced him to live, he is not wont to random acts of mischief either, having never learned from any heady teenage days the fun to be had from such occasional idiocy. No, Fred had committed the peony massacre for one simple reason. To stop Mrs Macpherson from talking to him.

It had worked.

So when Fred heads up the stairs to his flat, thoughts of Sarah filling his head and loins (the latter flushing him with feelings of shame as he wished his love for Sarah to be somehow purer than that, unsullied by such cumbersome and uncivilised primal urges), as they had done every night for the past eleven months since he'd met and fallen in love with her, he is not stopped by the yawning maw of Mrs Macpherson's never-ending gob asking him what he would be doing with himself tonight.

Which of course, saves him from having to answer.

Sarah, at the same time as this, is padding very, very slowly up and down the living room of her shoddy flat, shaking her head slightly from side to side as she moves. What is she thinking? *I don't know, you'd need to ask her.* Not that it'd do you much good.

There is a man on the floor in front of the couch that doesn't match the chair. It really is a hideous couch, even more so than the chair. And very uncomfortable too. But I very much doubt that is of any concern to the man on the floor. I would imagine, had we arrived here a few minutes earlier that the most pressing concern of the man on the floor would have been the kitchen knife sticking out of his chest. A cheap kitchen knife with a black plastic handle that might have been part of a set once upon a time. But even that is unlikely to bother him now.

The man on the floor is dead now. Very much so.

IV

When Fred arrives at Sarah's the next day bearing a lunch consisting of a meat based by-product and what may have once been a lettuce leaf, Sarah answers the door as usual and he follows her into the living room, as usual. The *unusual* part for you, dear reader, being Sarah's nonchalant answering of the door given what you by now – if you've been paying attention – know lies within the walls of her flat. The unusual part for Fred being the very much dead body on the living room floor.

Fred considers checking for a pulse, then realises two things:

1) He has no idea how to do that.

And

2) Given the clearly dead state of the man, it would be a bit pointless to try.

He turns to Sarah and asks if she's alright, imagines she nods her head slightly (of course, she does no such thing) and convinces himself that she is. He gives no thought, no compassion to the dead man on the floor. His only concern is for Sarah. He wonders what this brute must have done to her to deserve his fate and fantasizes himself, albeit a day too late, as her superhero protector, stopping this monster in his tracks before he gets a chance to hurt on hair on his beloved's beautifully shaped head.

Then he realizes he is going to have to fix this.

Sarah can hardly take care of it, can she? How could she dispose of a body when she doesn't even know how to get on a bus? How could she explain herself if she was caught?

Explain. Oh dear. What if someone asks him what he's doing with a dead body under his arm/in the boot of his car/lobbing it into the nearest lake? You can see his problem.

But without him, Sarah will be caught.

As Fred is driving himself into quite the little frenzy over these concerns, Sarah does something most unexpected. The woman who never utters a word, nods or shakes her head, and barely even blinks, approaches Fred and takes his hand in hers. She then clasps his hand to her right breast.

In that moment, Fred is decided.

He pulls the knife from the dead man's chest and makes his way to the bathroom. He has never been in Sarah's bathroom before. It is quite plain, but not entirely ugly. He rinses the blood from the dead man under the tap and stands facing the mirror, mouth agape, knife primed.

Sarah hears the screams from the bathroom. They are very loud screams.

Fred realises too late that he should have phoned the ambulance first – he can't very well do it now.

But there should be time to get rid of the body. Time to save Sarah. That's all he needs.

He scoops his tongue out of the sink and flushes it down the toilet.

Anna Russell likes to call herself a writer. Other people use different words to describe her, most of them swears.