

Cass the Dusty Giant

She couldn't stand it. His smoke drifted through the fence, blackening her white house and smearing her white curtains with specks of ash. The fence didn't keep anything out. It didn't keep out his singing; it didn't keep out his tuneless, aimless whistling or his cries of surprise as he blundered into things in the half dark, making his coffee out there on his veranda, waiting for the sun to rise.

Some of the more gossipy neighbours whispered that she didn't really *want* to keep him out. If she did, she would have built a *real* fence. In fact, neither she nor Cass had built the fence. They had simply woken one morning to find it separating their houses. Both assuming the other was responsible, they'd continued their silent bickering without interruption.

The Dutchess (as her neighbours dubbed her) often thought about moving, but she feared she'd never find anywhere as – as white again. Some said she had poisoned the ground on her side of the fence - she had, and a little on Cass' side too, if truth be told - so that nothing colourful would ever grow there. But still she was forced to live in his dust.

Dust of dreams, dream dust, storm dust.

Every day she rose at six and marched outside. 'Morning,' she'd grind her teeth, but he just smiled in return. He had obviously grown stupid in his old age. For a short while, the Dutchess had been happy. She had driven the curious children away from her white gate -

no one dared tread on her short, white grass. No one breathed on her sterile, white roses. She found it hard to believe she had ever been married to that dusty, hulking neighbour of hers. That had all come to an abrupt stop, three years ago, when she had woken with a headache and quietly started to scream.

There was no need to involve the neighbours in rowdy altercations. All that day she'd screamed, and far into the night. She held a steady pitch, never rose above a whisper and, as the sun rose on the second day, she thought she could last forever if that's what it took. In fact it took only twelve hours more before her husband, head ringing, made off into the icy night.

And then everything had been fine. Until he'd moved in next door with his dust and his noise and his blundering about.

The adults who gathered together over barbecues and coffees in each other's houses up and down the street thought a lot about this. They were thinking people. Most of all they thought about *the boy*. They shook their heads in meaningful unison and congratulated themselves on caring.

No one could remember what had happened first. Some said the boy grew sad. Others, the mother cold. And still others claimed that Cass' merry bumbling was to blame. But the Dutchess knew, and she fumed silently as he lined great, crazy sculptures at her gate and rode his Roman chariot to the boy's house, even though it was only two doors down.

Everyone knew that the boy inside had fallen under some kind of spell - a spider's? A witch's, maybe - and begun to feel very sad.

Once, about the time his mother started screaming, the boy sat down in his favourite chair. He sat very still. About sundown he found himself dreaming and when he woke, two days later, he was fastened to his seat by mighty cobwebs. He couldn't get out. Not that he really wanted to. It was - at the very least - his favourite chair. He thought about this to cheer himself up sometimes, when things were at their blackest.

Neither parent had accepted their son's imprisonment with open arms. Not at first. More than once Cass rode in there with great shears and tried to cut the boy free. Time and again he tried, but once free the boy um'd and ahh'd until the webs held him again. He was stuck fast. She, too, had tried to use her magic, always by cover of night. The boy could hear her muttering away next door as he dug his fingers ever deeper into the arms of his chair (it was his favourite chair, remember) and though that chair grew tattered and old, as though scarred by a great cat, she continued her muttering. And Cass, refusing to accept defeat, continued inventing more, and increasingly dangerous ways, to free his son. And the boy clung all the harder to his seat.

No one had asked him if he *wanted* to be free. And after a while he couldn't imagine himself anywhere else. Everything he needed he had in his head - hadn't his father taught him that? 'And it's clean in here,' he thought to himself. His mother took care of that, arriving every evening as his father shuffled away. 'At least I'm not making any mess,' he

thought, righteously.

One by one the other families in the street lost interest and moved away, until this peculiar little family was left alone, living three peculiar little lives in three peculiar little houses. The only outsider left was Guilt. Guilt still carried messages between Cass and the Dutchess - it was Guilt who had erected the fence between their houses. No one but Guilt could even remember the boy's name.

The boy watched his parents as they fussed around his edges. They never dared look at him directly anymore, only paused to steal the occasional, furtive glance, painful in its transparency. Still, on lighter days, the boy admired the intricate beauty of his cobwebs and wondered why no one else could see this. On those rare moments when a glimmer of sunlight forced its way through the webs in the window, the room came to life. And in the winter months, when the cobwebs formed icicles that hung like silent tears, the boy thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

His parents took it in turns to feed him. They had a strictly arranged system. And so Cass arrived each afternoon with a sense of hopelessness and a distant, fumbling smile; always dreaming (but never quite wishing) he could find a way to free his son. But the boy wished. He often imagined the roof of his house blowing away to expose the great sky - and he in all his glory screaming to the wind for help. But his mother had built his house herself, working fear and passion into bricks and mortar. So in this prison of love he stayed.

The routine was established. Everything ran like clockwork. Until Cass began to sneeze.

Cass rarely made his coffee inside these days. His house was too full of dust for making coffee - but he didn't mind. Things were growing in there, magic things that no one else knew about. It seemed the dust he shed made his dreams more powerful (or made him more able to remember them, he wasn't sure which). Lately, sometimes, he woke to find some new creation on the rug beside his bed - the one-armed echidna coffee table with sugar bowls for eyes, or the three-legged flute that was made of leather and could only be played with the toes.

More and more often lately he felt shocked by the things he made in his sleep and hurried to change them into something more acceptable. There was a small part of him that was still worried - despite the greatness of the things he dreamt up in the night - what the neighbours would think if they happened to look in the window in the morning. It failed to dawn on him that anyone not related to him had long since left the street. Still, he tried to atone for his nightly crimes by putting things to rights. And the creatures really didn't seem to mind. The echidna sometimes still snuffled the fence line. Often it ran screaming, inexplicably, into the bush down the back but always returned, its big sugary eyes smiling gloopily up at him.

He wondered about the Dutchess, how she could be the same woman he'd laughed with in hot marshmallow baths, her hair sticky with chocolate and sugar; and sometimes he

caught himself sighing when he remembered the way she'd squealed as he'd licked her clean. But more than that he wondered about the boy. Each afternoon he dropped over with a little something - a diamond python cake or some chocolate - but the boy could barely string a sentence together these days and the visits always left Cass feeling a little sad.

No one knows who's to blame for the night in question. Certainly Cass went to bed with a feeling of wanting to stir things up. And, yes, the Dutchess retired (considerably later) with a cracking feeling in her temples and an uncomfortably warm feeling in her stomach. 'If I could just drive his infernal dust away...' she muttered around her toothbrush... 'I'd wash everything clean.' And the boy wished harder than ever for just a glimpse of sky.

Next door, Cass snorted. In his dreams a small furry animal was clawing its way up the inside of his nose. His head began to throb, though he didn't know it yet, and a slimy trail of snot woozed its way down the inside of his left nostril, and slid sneakily into the corner of his mouth. In his dreams he was eating snails on a beach in France. He was making love to a crazy red-haired woman with fire in her belly. He breathed in and out, in rhythm with the rapping rain.

Just before sun up, as the moon was quietly settling into a cool blanket of clouds, Cass arose, put on his slippers, and headed outside. A strange green wind was blowing the rain around, making it hard to keep the stove alight, and tainting the bitter air with the taste of

copper. A flash of guilt surged within him - had his magic escaped outside while he slept?
The neighbours! God - the Dutchess!

His skin prickled as he wandered out into the storm. And, as he watched the sharp point of sun that picked its way through the centre of the clouds, his eyes filled with liquid. And he began to sneeze. A great tornado of dust flew up all around him. As if encouraged, the sky rumbled and cracked. He saw with horror and joy that the storm was spreading. All his plants - the dust, he knew, was good for the garden - shook in the wind. Some were uprooted. Some grew bigger. Some flowered and wilted and fell rotting to the ground.

Things began to break.

As the storm raged the boy woke from a light doze to the awful sounds of the world shaking around him. 'At last,' he said. He could hear the wind picking up speed and below this an explosive booming, like great drums of war (which was, in fact, his father sneezing) and in high pitched counter-point a terrible wailing (which was, in fact, his mother screaming). 'If this keeps up it will haul the roof off,' he thought. And slowly, amid childhood memories of Spiderman and the Wizard of Oz, the thought struck him: 'If I could throw a web to the ceiling - maybe when the roof comes off it will take me with it!' He had never tried to control the webs before. Tentatively, he mustered his strength. 'Hey!' He shouted above the wailing, 'I could even fly1!'

The screaming felt good. For a start, it was LOUD. The cause of the screaming, however, was not undistressing. The screamer stood, bare and vulnerable beneath the hills hoist, gazing up at the thundering sky. Above her beautiful, white house rose a great, grey cloud. And deep inside her ran a current of fear. 'What have I done?'

She'd watched in icy silence as, all over her beautiful white lawn, her spotless white statues, her crispy lace curtains - billowing freely through her broken windows - was dust. Cass' magic dust. She'd watched in horror as things began to grow. The very ground was shaking beneath her feet, great fissions opened up in her beautiful white lawn and out sprouted long, green grass. She'd stared in disbelief as, from the hem of her skirt, hopped a great, white frog, frantically searching for safety from the howling wind. And once she started screaming there really wasn't any need to stop.

Thunder roared, the Dutchess shrieked, his house looked on the verge of collapse, and still Cass sneezed. And between sneezes he ranted out loud - 'What have I done?' What on earth did I dare to dream?'

And then things were calm. The wind, for a moment, ceased, as if taking one mighty breath. Both parents watched in horror as the great, dusty gale centred itself over the boy's house and then, with one mighty heave, lifted it by the roof. As the walls crashed back to earth their son could clearly be seen sailing through the sky on the end of a cobweb - 'He's grown wings. Beautiful white wings,' his mother cried - and away he flew. Straight for the sun.

And, slowly, the ice began to thaw. Sometimes over coffee Cass would fold her into his great arms. 'Did you see the look on his face when he took off?'

'Yes, I did.' And, quietly chuckling to themselves they'd watch the sun, and wait for it to rise.