

## No Art

by Francesca Ryan

“Come on darlin, give us a smile now.” He shook his head her flushed face.

Her arm ached from where he had gripped it. Too hard. Too long. She could still feel the fingers in the soft flesh of her upper arm. There could be no running away from it, she knew that. She shivered at this thought.

He wagged his finger in her face and tapped her on the nose. “Don’t look like that, babes. You got to learn to keep that temper of yours under control. You let your mouth run like that, you got to expect some come back.” He smiled at her. “Better you hear it from me. One of these days, you’re going to get a smacking if you carry on that way.” He wasn’t smiling now.

Her heart was still thumping. She watched as the cat walked slowly between them and jumped up onto the blue chair. It coiled itself elegantly into the cushion, and began cleaning its paws. Its dark fur gleamed in the shaft of sunlight coming through the half-closed curtains. She watched the dust particles float lazily in the light. Must do some cleaning. Dusting. Why am I thinking about this now for God’s sake? Got to get out of this. Keep calm.

“Listen to me, baby girl. You got to take a look at yourself, getting all worked up like that. You’ve got blood on your hand. You should be more careful when you use a knife.” He took her hand turned upwards and looked at it. “Not so bad.” He tapped her face lightly with two fingers. “Maybe you need some anger management training.”

She looked at him. Maybe she could get him out on some pretext. Maybe she could risk trying to leave. Where would she go? Oh Christ. She was sweating now.

“You’re trembling, babes. Here, come sit down.” He set her down on the sofa. “Want a cup of tea?” He stroked the hair from her face. “I sometimes wonder what goes on in that pretty little head of yours. Or am I being sexist?” Laughing now, as he made quotation marks with his fingers around the word. He gave her ear a tug. “Where would you be my lady, if I wasn’t here to keep you under control?”

'I'd be in the car and out of here. Maybe a train would be better. What about the cleaning up? Have to clean. Dust. Cat hair. Blood. Her thoughts were racing now. Calm yourself and think properly. There's a way out of this.'

She heard him filling the kettle and opening a cupboard.

He came towards her with the mug, slopping some as the cat wove through his legs and unbalanced him slightly.

"Here you go. And a biscuit. Don't eat it all at once!" he laughed at his own joke. How she hated him now.

'Must do the cleaning, a spill on the carpet. Calm yourself.'

"We're out of cat food. Don't suppose it matters much to himself, though. He'll just go next door and mooch as usual. It's just cupboard love with that one. Mind your tea."

She shut her eyes.

'Always going round to that that old woman's house. I've told her a million times not to feed it. She's made him fat. Her fault. She shouldn't have fed him. Get a grip now. Think.'

"I'll nip out and get him some, babe. They've got the stuff he likes at the small Tesco's. You take it easy. And don't be going anywhere." He looked at her and raised his eyebrows. She nodded mutely.

She watched as the cat rolled the potato peeler out from under the chair, playing with it. Patting it to and fro until satisfied it was dead. As he carefully licked his paws clean, she stared at the bloody smear that was left on the rug.

'Clean it. Put the thing in the bin. Quickly now.'

He was coming back. Oh God.

She heard him drop the shopping on the kitchen table and pour himself a beer.

"Did you hear that siren, babes? Tons of police next door. Taped it off. This cat won't be eating at that place anytime soon. Paul said he reckons someone might have done the old bag in. They'll be wanting to talk to you I bet. I mean, half the bloody street heard you having a go at the old witch. Alright Trouble, come on let's get your tin open. I bloody hate the smell of this stuff."

The cat pushed itself against his legs.

"Alright, alright, I'm coming." He took the mug from her shaking hand and picked up the biscuit from where it had fallen.

"You look shattered, babes. Maybe take a little rest. I'll pop this in the bin."

She snatched it from his hand and ran out the door.

When he went to pick her up from the custody suite, he was told that she'd been charged; no bail and that she did not want to see him. He couldn't take it in. Who was she? He wondered how many people he had looked at in his life and never really seen. Dear God. What should he do now?