from The Track of Real Desires

Beverly Lowry

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Beverly Lowry

from her novel,

The Track of Real Desires

Leland looked out the kitchen window. The side yard was a jungle of unpruned fruit trees, oak-leaf hydrangeas, weeds, tall stalks of ground artichokes, and perennial herbs running wild. Anyone who didn't know Baker would assume that here was a piece of useless ground, left to go wildly to seed. Leland could imagine Baker shoving a careful hand down among the Johnson grass, coming up with a peerless stalk of rosemary or bunch of mint, the hydrangea for the umbrella stand, a peach, a plum, some particular kind of greenery for the table, perfect for a fill-in.

She reached for the faucet, then drew her hand quickly back, remembering Baker's parting instructions to not, for God's sake, turn the water on. Mell was upstairs resting. Baker and Toby had gone to pick up Roy from school. Leland was alone, waiting to have her interview. Baker and Mell wouldn't say too much about this Roxie Sidwell, but when Mell said "Wait till you meet Roxie," in the same unfathomable way she'd spoken about the rat, Leland had to wonder.

The kitchen was a wreck, stacks of plates and bowls on every surface, waiting for the sink to get fixed. Leland checked the clock on the microwave. Half an hour.

Hearing a light tapping sound, she brought her attention back to the window. She looked for a bird, but the sound wasn't at the window, exactly. She leaned over the sink to look out and heard a voice faintly calling, as if from the drain itself. And then
the birdlike tapping sound came again. Leland leaned her head down, ear first, toward the drain. Mell's hard work had done its job, and except for scraps of shrimp peel and bits of debris the sink was empty.

The voice came again, faint and ghostly, like a far-off cry for help. Leland straightened, looked around. There was nobody, nothing. Retrieving a small white espresso cup she thought had been hers at lunch, she refilled it with coffee from the French plunger pot. The coffee was inky with chicory and, because it had been sitting since lunch, barely warm.

She listened for the voice again, but all she heard was the squeak of a floorboard somewhere.

These Strange Park houses, full of ghostly creaks and whispers. Leland used to walk through this neighborhood on her way to class at Marlenetta's studio in the old Elks Lodge on the edge of downtown. The hulking brick houses looked to her like bank vaults, symbols of the safe life—the father with a steady job, the mother making cookies, the life of homeowners and good citizens. When her mother died, Leland discovered they hadn't had to live like gypsies all those years, moving in the middle of the night to yet another rented house. John Standard had insurance; the Air Force took care of its widows. Dolly might have bought a house, made their life better. Leland had no idea why she hadn't. Fear, perhaps, that the money might run out, and then she'd have to go back to Iowa. When Leland dreamed about Eunola, she was often standing on a street in the dark, looking into the window of a Strange Park home.

She took a sip of the thick black sludge Baker called coffee.

"Help." It came again, from the walls.

Leland gripped the cup. She did not know how Melanie and Baker managed to get up the morning after Lucy died, take the next breath, much less find
a way to make a life of any kind for themselves. Once again Leland looked out the kitchen window. Lost in thought, she was turned in profile to the door leading to the laundry room and the back door when the man came in.

For a moment he stood there, not knowing how to keep from frightening her. Gazing out the window as if transfixed, she lifted the cup halfway to her mouth and then clearly sensing his presence—hesitated.

He extended a hand in her direction, as if to calm her, and spoke in a low voice. "Don't let me startle you."

As she gasped, her hand came up and the cup hit a tooth, then dropped to the floor, spraying dark, heavy droplets across the linoleum.

"Ahh, that's exactly what I did not want to do." He came over, picked up the cup and lightly placed his hand on her arm. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I don't know why I—"

"I'm sorry. He took his hand away. "I was trying to prepare you..."

She fingered her tooth. "No harm done," she said. "Really." She took a step back. "No harm." She ran her tongue across her teeth.

"I was down there"—with a small crescent wrench he pointed toward the floor—"tapping the pipe." He set down the wrench, the cup. "I thought you were Mell."

"You're the plumber."

He held out his hand, looked at it, withdrew it.
"I'm also filthy," he explained. "Jacky Nelms. And you're Leland."

"Yes."
"Not Mell at all."
"No."

He was wearing a faded blue work shirt with pearl buttons, blue jeans, no belt, worn leather lace-
up boots, the shirt open one button too many to be an accident. He had a faintly Mediterranean look, his naturally tan skin stretched taut and smooth across his skull, so that the high cheekbones and broad forehead beneath seemed on the verge of breaking through. His eyes were an intense dark brown, his convict-cropped hair altogether gray. He was slim but not skinny, and there was a sense of athleticism about him, of wired, insistent focus. He looked sculpted, a madman, fabulous.

Realizing she was staring, Leland came to, enough to realize he was staring back. “I’m sorry I didn’t answer,” she said. “I heard. You were under the house?”

“Flat on my back.”
“I thought you were…”
“A ghost?”
“I started to say.”
“I thought so.”
“You were calling Mell.”
“Yes.”
“‘Mell’ sounded like…”
“‘Help’?”
“How did you know?”
He shrugged. “Figures.” He turned his back, went to the sink, opened the tap, watched the water disappear.

“This ought to hold,” he said. “At least through tonight and dinner.”

A frozen moment. Leland studied his back.

He turned around, hooked his thumbs through the loops of his jeans and frowned. For a second Leland felt him back off into the safe reality of the situation—his friends’ kitchen, a clogged drain, a job—and pull away from her. For a second, in self-protection she did the same thing. It was crazy. He was as obsessive, as single-minded and as rapt as she. She didn’t know who he was or how far this would
take her, but she knew what he was up for. She wanted to leave the room, the house, just go. She wasn’t even, for God’s sake, over Simon yet.

Jacky Nelms made a slight adjustment within himself and came back, eyes hard on her. “Well?” It was a challenge.

“Yes. All right.” She met him halfway, holding her ground, doing her bluff tough-guy dancer pose.

He smiled and gave a little laugh. Briefly, her brusque matter-of-factness, so unsouthern, had thrown him, the way she stood there, shoulders squared, head thrown back.

When she spoke her voice was low. “Listen... umm...”

He waited. He had learned. If you waited, women declared themselves much more straightforwardly than men. But you had to shut up first. Let them talk.

“Do you have plans?”

He cocked his head. “Plans?”

“We have an extra place at the table tonight. A last-minute cancellation.”

The front door opened, the dog’s nails clicked and Baker came into the kitchen. Standing in the door, he heard Leland, saw the whole thing. “Ahem.” He said the word. “Yes, Jacky...ah...would you like to come for supper tonight?”

Before Jacky could answer, Baker tacked on a requirement. “Only if you’ve fixed the pipe. Otherwise. . .”

Jacky reached behind himself, turned the water on full force.

“Jesus,” Baker said. “God. Oh well, fine.”

Leland felt a flutter of panic. She was moving too fast—again—hurling herself forward without thinking. “Baker. . .” She looked for help.

He waved her doubts away. “Don’t be silly,” he said. “Anybody’s better than Hank.” He pointed at Jacky and grinned. “Even you. But, oh God, you do
know who's—oh..." He threw up his hands. "I don't want to think about it."

Arms flailing, Baker left the room. Light quick steps pattered down the stairs, and the front door slammed.

Leland tilted her head. "I have something to tell you."

"Oh my God, serious. Are you sure I want to know?"

She laughed lightly. "I'm positive you don't."

"Then don't. We haven't even shaken hands."

"No." She held out her hand.

"Let it wait."

Toby had told her over and over again, wait, go slow, she was always jumping the gun, declaring herself too soon and without much warning, or need. "All right." She let it go. "But—"

"Let it wait. Now..." He picked up his wrench. "I have another job, then I'll freshen up for dinner. What time?"

"Seven-thirty, I think Mell said."

"You think?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Seven-thirty. Tough guy."

"Look who's talking. I'll be back."

"My son is with me."

"And?"

She shrugged. "Nothing. I... Why don't I know you?"

"I moved here in the tenth grade—you were gone by then."

"So you're younger."

"Than?"

She circled her arm. "Me. Us."

"Not significantly. A year or so. I remember stories about you. It was a huge deal, you know. Leland Standard quit school. She went to Memphis to be a dancer."
“I didn’t go to be a dancer.”
“Whatever.”
“But I did go to Memphis.”
He was quiet.

Her face was a little crooked, a joke kind of face. When she dropped her macho stance, the soft side of her emerged. She was arrogant and at the same time vulnerable, innocent and clever, knew what she wanted but not always how to ask for it.

“At any rate, I remember.”
“Your parents did what?”
“Ran a store, over by Moe’s. A Greek, a Jew. She was the Greek. We ran an Italian grocery store and deli.” He shrugged. “You tell me.”
She laughed. “About what?”
“You know. Their only child—I was supposed to be a rocket scientist, educated from money made by their long labors and hard work, but—”
“You liked plumbing?”
“Hardly. Took a long time to figure out. The words dancing on the page when I tried to read was no letter ballet. They danced because my mind was making them.” He touched his broad forehead.
“Wires crossed.”
“Dyslexia?”
“By the time we knew, I was fed up with failure and school—and besides, I was good with my hands. Also, I have this strange, continuing belief in a full life as the point of living, not a job, maybe because I gave up rocket science early on and lost the feeling of being called to a profession and found other ways to occupy myself. I do my job very well, but it’s the smallest part of what I am.”
“An aristocratic notion.”
“Go on.”
“Work as a sideline, the life well lived as the goal, the point, the satisfaction. I’d call that leisure-class thinking.”
“From a plumber.”
“Don’t be coy.”
“It’s what I do.”
“Be coy?”
“Plumb, woman. Plumb.” He lowered his voice half an octave. A trick, but she liked it.
“Aren’t you the one who brings Baker the New York and London papers?”
“I didn’t say illiterate. But I am a plumber. I stick my hand down toilets and grease-clogged disposals, live my life in people’s dark and dirty nether worlds.”
“You are a phony, Jacky Nelms.”
He came to her, placed his hand on the tips of her spiky hair to feel the points, slid it to her neck, cupping her jawbone. He was not tall; she only had to stand a little on tiptoes to reach him. She pressed her mouth to his. Her tongue darted between his lips.
“I knew that,” he said.
There was a noise from the other room, Baker screaming something about soup.
Leland pulled back. “Yes.” She touched his cheek with her fingers. “You’re warm.”
“Genes.” He brushed away a bit of dirt he had left on her blouse. “Until later, Leland Standard,” he said. And he drew his top lip inside his mouth as if to taste her tongue once again. His lips were thin. A deep scar cut the bottom one in two and ran toward his chin. Leland wondered what kind of trouble he’d been in. He turned and was gone.
“Well.” Baker waltzed in, having poured himself a gin and tonic. He shook the glass, rattling the ice. “You like a drink, Lela?”
“No thank you. Jesus, why did I do that?”
“It’s fine. Jacky’s my best friend.”
“Can we make another pot of coffee?”
“Sweetie, of course. There’s only one thing.”
"Oh God, what?"
"Jacky and Dog Boyette."
"What?"
"Like oil and water."
"Oh God, well." She shrugged. "Is Toby back?"
She looked around as if he might be there in the room.
"He and Roy are walking the goddamn dog and Freddy Krueger."
"Freddy who?"
"The rat."
"They took the rat for a walk?"
And then someone was knocking at the door and Baker was gone and Leland was running upstairs to get a packet of vitamins, wondering as she went what in the world had possessed Toby to take a walk with a dog in love, a twelve-year-old boy and a rat.