

Spoken Spells

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“A small girl was playing with the birds and her sister was with her. Just for nothing you started shouting at them and when their parents tried to stop you, you cursed all of them—do you remember that?”

The accusation came from the figure we had seen lurking by the vase of welcoming lilies on our rooftop terrace as we came out of the lift.

“Please—not a suicidal teenager!” Renee my flatmate had said, only half in jest.

One drawback to having a private rooftop lobby is anyone who shows up is either an unexpected visitor or potential jumper.

The girl turned on Renee—

“You were there too—I recognise you—that’s how I track you guys down—you must have heard her curse us! She said my Dad would leave us—and he did! And she made my Mum to die of cancer—now my Mum has got the lump growing and the doctors say must go and operate! Cut all out also maybe still will die! Some more she made my sister get hit by the car—”

Renee retreated before the barrage of Singlish and spittle.

The young woman—she was very young, I saw—had the fierce focused intensity you sometimes see on people verging on insanity... or on the brink of a major discovery.

Her hair looked dirty and she smelled... the stale sour odour of unhealthy and unwashed flesh and clothes surrounded and moved with her.

Meeting her for the first time, I would classify her as crazy.

“Should we call the police?” Renee asks quietly from behind me.

“Call Gary,” I say. I keep between Renee and our visitor. Gary, Chairman of our Management Committee, lives in the penthouse in the other tower—a reliable witness.

“You made my Dad leave! And now you are making my mum get cancer and die! And you made my sister go and run in front of that stupid car and—and—”

Hot tears and memories overcome her words here, but I know it is not her sister these harsh raw sobs are for as she twists herself in agony against our front door. Renee, ever soft-hearted, moves over to comfort the intruder. Instinctively I reach out an arm to block, to protect. The blue ceramic vase is flung aside, shatters and—

“Did you see?” The madness rises and shrieks again. “Did you see what she did? I didn’t break that—but I know you all are going to blame me!”

“No one is blaming you...” Renee says, but she backs away, retreats to take her place behind me.

“She took my boyfriend away!” Here, at last we have arrived at the heart of the woman’s bitterness. Instead of recognising it, stress and incredulity burst out Renee in a sudden spurt of laughter.

“Her--?”

“When she cursed me! She said I would go mad! That she would make me go mad and never get married!”

Behind Renee, the lift doors open. Handsome, efficient Gary appears with two Filipina maids, his chauffeur and an apologetic security guard; armed with kitchen knives, Gary’s golf clubs and a Koran.

“Police are on their way,” Gary says, “Renee just said you had a psycho up here—didn’t know if she meant from paparazzi or from ISD,”

The policemen took her away of course. One of them stopped to say he was sorry to trouble us, but he would be back with a report for us to sign. Shyly, he told Renee he recognised her—he had her CDs and always watched Presidents Star Charity when she sang there—she gave him a can of chrysanthemum tea and an autographed photo and he went off happy, promising he would make sure she was never bothered again—at least not by that ‘whacko nut case’.

The mad woman did not stop shouting. We could hear her even when they got her to the ground floor, the desperation in her voice growing with the distance.

Renee went into our flat. I could tell she was shaken.

The girl was wrong. I had not made her father leave them. It had been clear he was already on his way out of their lives. Likewise her mother's cancer had already been hovering, a dark stickiness in the air around her when I saw them a year ago. All I had done was notice it, name it, solidify it.

Renee would probably not remember the two of them sitting and sniping at each other though even she had sensed their bitter antagonism... in fact,

"That girl is going to grow up just like her mother," My Renee had said of our uninvited visitor then—I knew she was referring to the woman's hard, calculating eyes and the harsh lines etched around a discontented mouth stained with cheap lipstick. Coming from Renee that was an insult. When the girl, sent to stop her younger sister from running in the path driveway traffic, taught the child to hurl fountain stones at the birds and cars instead, Renee had said quietly,

"Let's go. Now,"

And I had not shouted at the damned family. I spoke pleasantly. There is no need for harsh tones when your words hold power. Even Renee, already by the door waiting for me to pay our bill, had not heard a thing.

Though perhaps, just perhaps I had influenced her little sister's fall in front of that car... if it hadn't been a car it would have been a van, a truck or a bus...

Some things hang in the balance and a word spoken is all it takes to tip the consequence...

But as for her? I had never said she would go mad. Only that people would call her mad.

I do not usually speak my spells aloud, but sometimes incantation is part of the process.

“Are you all right?” Renee says. She looks beautiful and concerned. “Forget about that girl. She’s crazy,”

Not yet, but yes. She will very likely be labelled crazy after telling her story to the police and her court appointed psychiatrist and her boss—her former boss—and her shift supervisor at McDonalds and her mother’s doctors and late sister’s bereavement counsellor...

I decide I can forget her.

“I love you,” I say.

My words bind and protect us as she smiles and turns to go in. I will follow. But first I adjust the sand, the salt and watching seeds that shield our entrance. I will replace the vase and its contents tomorrow. These items are more for show than anything else, of course.

The most powerful magic still lies in words—

Not in words spoken but in directions heard.