The Cage

Nancy Kimball*
Katy cranes her neck to examine the ceiling. "There should be a spider web up there. That's what's wrong with this room. It doesn't have cobwebs. How are you supposed to get interested enough to write anything in this dingy cell?"

"That's not the only thing wrong." Len sips the spearmint tea, then sets the steaming cup back on its saucer on the window sill. "You trap plants that ought to be outside. Why do people have to take pots and fill them with dirt and stick plants in them? It's like a museum; you trap them, preserve them, keep them from rotting with your hands-off attitude. You're putting them in a cage—it's unnatural. Just think about what a cage does to a person, to an animal; a pot does that to a plant."

"But these plants aren't caged. Look at them—they're growing as tall and big around as they feel like."

"How deep are their roots?" Len pauses as if waiting for her response.

Katy's eyes narrow. Now everything he has been saying falls into place—why he chided her friend Amanda about her parakeet, what he found so repulsive in the dried flower arrangement in the downstairs lounge. She begins to understand.

He continues, "Remember just a few months ago when it was still nice enough outside to walk around in the grass, pick a violet if you saw a patch of them? When it was still warm enough to just sit and listen to all the real plants? Well, that's where you should be now if you want plants." He points through the frosty panes. "They're still out there. See those evergreens? And the bushes? Both the plants and you would stay healthier out there."

"Let's get out of here. It's stale, it's a cage." She has been pacing across the gritty hardwood floor, furiously rubbing her palms on her jeans as she did when feeling trapped. Now she...
stops to face him squarely. “I can’t write; not now, not here. Let’s go for a walk. Let’s climb a tree.”

“You’re kidding. You mean you’re actually gonna do it—just like that? Aren’t you worried about writing your paper so you can get a good grade? Better think about it.”

“Oh, cut out the sarcasm, smart-ass. That’s the last thing I need right now. I’d never put out anything worth reading if I stayed here—it’d just be stale like everything else. We’re leaving.”

Len hides a grin as he turns to grind out his cigarette, takes one last sip of the cooling tea and reaches for his jacket. Dumb, Katy thinks, for him to be wearing that flimsy thing on a cold day like this. He should switch to the long, heavy wool one when he gets home.

Downstairs now, she zips up the ski jacket, crams her hands into the fleece-lined mittens. The click of the lock as she turned the key still bounces through her mind with a strangely satisfying echo. She has never felt freer. She has locked the cage away from them, letting the words die so they could reincarnate. “Look what Katy’s doing,” she still hears them mock. “Look what Katy did, Katydid, Katydid.”

She watches with anticipation as Len prepares in the anteroom, pulling on buckskin gloves and hooking Air Force tear-drop shades to his ears. Hesitating before throwing her weight against the paned door, Katy imagines herself a child drawing back just before making the final leap to the spring-fed pool.

Now in the iced sunlight, the chill piercing her head, the matter is settled. She doesn’t know where this journey is going, but she will follow it through. She throws back her head with a laugh and releases the trap door, freeing the stored-up jumble of stale thoughts.

Cash the check; yes, that’s why she came out, that’s where her feet are headed. A picture of a staid, middle-aged bank teller with half-glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, peering out from behind iron bars flashes across her mind. All day long he counts out bills, takes in deposits, stamps checks “FOR DEPOSIT ONLY.” And all day long those metal bars trap him behind the counter.
Katy jerks herself out of this brooding reverie.

Closer to the main road, she notices Len shivering down in the collar, wild hair tossing in the wind, cheeks reddening with its chill. And now he's the one wanting to cut through the snow. He draws her along by telling her of the fantasy by Robbins about the magician's underwear.

Magician's underwear? The cold escape really must have affected him. Now it's affecting her, too, because she's interested.

They break into a bouncing, Chaplinesque canter which leads them to the first bank in view. Pushing through the shiny glass doors, Katy spots the teller talking on the phone. She is anxious to be done with this banking business and within minutes they are once again running along the sidewalk and making a game of stepping only on the cracks.

Almost skipping by the music store, Len slides to a halt and retraces his steps to stand in front of the display case, gazing in wonder at the bagpipes, piccolos, bamboo flutes.

A woman in her early twenties leans heavily on the counter inside. The bold black and white stripes of her sweater draw Katy's gaze uncomfortably away from the clerk's blank stare. Len doesn't notice.

"They must be having some kind of special on flutes and things," he says wistfully. "But I don't have any money. If a song could buy a bagpipe, I'd sing all day for those people."

All Katy can see, though, is a lonely clerk waiting for them to push through the door.

They come upon Whitman's Corner Book Store. The magician's underwear must be had. They find the book in a forgotten corner now claimed by powdery dust and cobwebs. She flips to the first page and there it is, "Floating in a stagnant pond on the outskirts of Miami." Could be interesting, Katy muses, if this is any promise of what the rest will be like. She desperately tries to convince herself that the afternoon is going better here than it would have back in the cage.

They are getting colder now, facing into the wind. Noticing a bank clock repeatedly flashing that twelve degrees above, Fahrenheit, equals twelve below, Celsius, Len says this must mean that it's really zero.
Why that senseless comment, Katy wonders silently. She's getting annoyed now, beginning to question the wisdom of this walk. Is he showing her reality ("inspiration" he called it as they left her room), or leading her away from it? Is she just the romantic dreamer, thinking that "getting her head straight" could be this easy?

Len, however, laughs out, "Isn't this great? It'll give you something to write about. Here, how about this—" He bounds into the road, the nearest car a block away. "You can write about how the Great White Spirit stood in the middle of the Big Roadway while the cars ran right through him—and he still lives!" He mimicks an English bobby twirling his billy club and tooting his air whistle.

The last two blocks before Len's house disappear quickly. Two flights up, take a right, through 31 and suddenly they are into the world of art prints, Batman sheets, and a lone Liebfraumilch bottle.

Len is pulling out his paperbacks: Nietzsche, Rousseau, Lawrence, and Trudeau's Doonesbury Tales. Something in these doesn't seem quite right to Katy, yet it does. A contradiction, yet a glimmer of the true Len, of the Great White Spirit who sleeps in Batman sheets.

The two linger in the room for warmth; she glances over some of his scribbled verse:

trailing the innocent murmurs
tantamount to conspiracy
against Deities . . .

He urges her onto the next page:

i have been
passionate
with discipline . . .

It is hard for Katy to read much further than the first few lines of any one poem. Discipline? Katy is sure Len must have been groping for something he sensed beyond himself. It certainly doesn't spark the inspiration in her that he was sure would follow.
When he asks what she thinks of them, she mumbles “interesting” or “original.” Then quickly, to cover the awkward silence, asks if they shouldn’t be heading back. He opens the closet door adorned with the playmate-of-the-month calendar, yanks out the long wool coat, and they turn downstairs.

They break out into the cold once again and reverse their path. Lost in her own whirlpool of thoughts, Katy notices nothing external along the way except Len’s presence. Like a mosquito buzzing around her ear in sweltering heat, he is trailing her back to her room in this shivering cold. Annoyed, she does her best to ignore him.

Another click—the door to the cage is unlocked. Swinging open the door, she expects to find some sign of rebirth, of freedom from bonds. But all is exactly as they left it—papers strewn across the desk and floor, the neglected tea cup perched on the window sill. She can still feel the bonds, smell the metal bars. Len settles down with a book. She sits down to write, half expecting the words to flow like a river suddenly undammed.

But they don’t flow; the words are set down painstakingly and then scratched out in frustration. Finally a phrase does come, then a sentence, then a whole paragraph. Katy feels like the black widow spinning her web. Only one fine strand emerges at a swoop, yet with time the separate strands are spun into a unit.

The pressure of the cage’s bonds, the smell of the iron bars begin to carry a sweetness with them, telling her that these are the real freedoms she needs. She writes this, and more, gradually, comes. She glances at Len, who is puzzling over his reading. Few seconds pass before he looks up with a relaxed smile. “Now aren’t you glad you found out how to keep your words from going stale? All you needed was to jump outside the fence.”

Katy turns back to her paper. She has chosen to lock the cage from the inside, this time freeing herself from within the bars.