

# THE SONGBIRDS OF PAIN

By Carry Kilworth

Tomorrow they would break her legs.

At first, every morning there were songbirds in the fire trees outside her hospital window, and every evening the frogs sang in the storm drains with choirs of bass voices. (Not when she woke or went to sleep: In her twilight world of pain there was no real sleep, just a clinging to the edge of a dream, an intermittent misting of the brain.) Then there came a time when the birds and frogs seemed to be singing from within her, deep within her flesh, her bones. The pitch of their notes was, on occasion, as sharp as thorns; and at other times, as dull as small hammer blows on a hollow skull. Her world was fully of the agony of their music: The songbirds of Brazil entered her blood and swam the channels of her body with slow wings. The tree frogs, the ground frogs, they also filled the long, narrow passages of her limbs, her breasts, and her mind with their melodies. If snakes could sing they would have been there, too, accompanying the cicadas and the grasshoppers; the rhythmic, ticking beetles; even the high-singing bats and the clicking lizards. She tried to remember the time when these songsters, these choral wonders of an exotic lands, were not part of her, were separate from her. There was a man, somewhere, who led her to this state. If she could remember . . .

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Philip would indulge her, she knew, to the extent of his fortune. Anita's approach, however, was cautious because of the nature of her request. Even so, the amount of money involved was considerable and, as was his habit, he reached for the whiskey when he was thrown off balance. She had come to realize that it was not the alcohol that was the crutch but the need to hold something in his hand upon which he could concentrate while he recovered his composure. The worst was yet to come. She waited until he had poured his drink and was gripping the glass.

"Yes—" she mentioned the sum—"it's a lot of money, I know, but I'll give up a few things ... my fur coat, this flat. . . ."

He looked up sharply. "The flat? Where will you live? You're not moving out of London. What do you want this money *for*?"

She hesitated before replying. It was difficult to tell someone you

needed a great deal of money in order to have all your bones broken. It would sound ridiculous. Perhaps it *was* ridiculous.

“I’ll have to go away . . . it’s an operation. Don’t look so alarmed. It’s not that I’m sick or anything.”

He frowned, rolling the crystal tumbler slowly between his palms. Anita wondered whether Philip’s wife was aware of this trait: She liked to think she could read this man better than Marjorie could, but perhaps that was arrogance—conceit? Perhaps Marjorie was aware of more important supports than whiskey glasses. Like mistresses.

“Cosmetic surgery? But you’re already beautiful. I like the way you are. Why should you want to change?”

“It’s more than that, Philip. Something I can’t really explain. . . . I’m twenty-six. In a few more years my present . . . looks will begin to fade. I need a beauty that will remain outstanding. It’s all I have. I’m not clever like you. Nor do I have the kind of personality that Marjorie possesses. You both have a charisma that goes deeper than looks. You may think it’s something superficial that I’m searching for, but I do need it. I want to make the *best* of myself. If I’m beautiful to begin with, then that just means that I need less improvement—but there is a great deal of me I want improved.”

“Where will you go? Where is this place, the USA?”

She shook her head. Perhaps this was one time when he would refuse her adamantly. In which case she would have to bide her time, wait for another lover, just as wealthy, but more willing to indulge her.

Yet she knew she could not leave this man. She loved him much too deeply.

“Brazil. A town on the edge of the jungle called Algarez. There’s a surgeon there . . . I would trust him. It’s a difficult operation, but I know he’s carried it out on two other women. It was very successful.”

“Brazil?” Again, the rolling of the glass, the slight frown of disapproval. She knew that his business interests would not allow him time to travel at this point in the calendar. She would have to go alone. “Do I know either of these women?”

“One of them. Sarah Shields.”

“The actress. But my God, she was unrecognizable when she returned to society. I mean, she looked nothing like her former self—extremely beautiful, yes, but. . . .”

Anita suddenly wanted to knock the glass out of his hand.

Sometimes he lacked the understanding of which she knew he was capable.

“. . . beautiful, *yes, but*. . . .” There was no *buts* to Anita. Everything was contained in one word. Beauty. She wanted it badly. *Real* beauty, not just a passable beauty. To be the most . . .

“Will you help me?” she asked simply.

He looked into her eyes, and suddenly he smiled. A wonderful, understanding smile, and she knew it would be all right. Philip was usually the most generous of men, but there was that protective shield around his heart, wineglass thin but resistant nonetheless, which she had to shatter gently at times. It was not just the large issues, like this, that revealed the fragile shell that encapsulated his *givingness*, but small things, too—like a trip to the art gallery or the reading of a poem to her while they lay in bed after making love. It was something to do with his fear of being manipulated, something concerned with defending that part of his ego that abhorred control.

She knew he needed her but not as much as she needed him—in fact her own need reached desperation point at times, and she resented the fact that his, though apparent, was not as consuming as her own. Anita thought suddenly of his wife. She had never been jealous of Marjorie. Anyone else, yes, but Marjorie was his wife and, more important, she came *before* Anita.

“When will you leave?” he asked.

“Next month,” she replied.

Anita went into the kitchen to make some coffee while Philip finished his whiskey. As she made the coffee she considered the forthcoming trip. Travel was now one of her greatest enjoyments, although this had not always been the case. Brazil. She wondered whether she would like it there. She remembered her first visit abroad, how awful it had been. Normandy, as a young girl on a school exchange. It had been a depressing visit. The

family she stayed with insisted on impressing her with trips to the war graves—rows and rows of white crosses. Strange, she thought, that men who had died in such chaos should be buried in neat, symmetrical lines, while conversely, men who had lived quiet, orderly lives—bankers, stockbrokers, insurance people—usually ended up in untidy graveyards, their headstones looking as if they had been planted by some blind, maladroit giant.

She shook off the thoughts of death. After all, it was not death that awaited her in Brazil, but fulfillment, albeit that the road to that end was paved with pain. She knew it was going to be hard, but it was a rebirth that was worth the agony she would have to endure. She hoped her mind was strong enough. When Philip met her she had been a twenty-year-old shop assistant. He had persuaded her to take up a career in modeling so that she could travel with the small fashion house he financed and they could be together more often.

She was now twenty-six and wiser only in a world as seen through Philip's eyes. He had kept her closeted, comfortable, and happy for four years. Her opinions were secondhand and originally his. She realized this had created an insipid personality, but for the present she was satisfied with the status quo. Later, when she had lost him (as she was bound to do one day), perhaps she could develop her own identity.

Of Philip's former life, she knew only the surface details. He had married at twenty-five while in the process of clawing his way to the first ledge on the cliff of success. Success, in Philip's terms, was money and certain pleasures that went with it. He was a considerate lover and good to his wife in all but absolute fidelity. He was not a philanderer. Also he did not squander money on luxuries he did not really require, like yachts, cars, and swimming pools. He had one of everything he needed except . . . except women. The thought jarred when she reduced it to those terms. There was a certain greed associated with his wants that she generously connected with insecurity. The truth probably lay somewhere between those two character defects.

His had not been an easy climb, either. He had come from a poor background. Philip had since acquired considerable polish and was thought of by his contemporaries as an aristocratic businessman rather than working class—*nouveau riche*.

At the time Anita had met him, he had been thirty-two. He had given her a lift home after work at a store for which he supplied new fashions. Now she was making coffee for him following an evening at the theater and

before he went home to his wife.

She took in the coffee, and they drank it in silence. They would not make love tonight. Sex was not the most important part of their relationship, in any case. Philip needed her more for the affection she gave him. Not that Marjorie was unaffectionate, but Anita had come to know that while Philip was a tough businessman, he was privately very sentimental and needed a great deal of emotional support. It provided the background softness to a life full of hard-bitten decisions. Neither woman was volatile or demonstrative. They were both warm and loyal, with loving dispositions.

It was not contrasts Philip required, but additions. In turn, he gave much—almost as much as either woman asked for—in both practical and emotional terms.

“I’ll have to be getting home now,” he said, after the coffee.

She nodded. “I know.”

“I’m sorry. I’d like to stay tonight, but Marjorie’s expecting me.”

“It’s all right, Philip, really it is. I’m fine. I’ve got a good book and the television if I need it. Please don’t worry.”

He kissed her gently on the brow, and she stood up and fetched his coat.

“I’ll call you,” he said, standing at the door.

“I’ll be here.” He never could say goodbye, always using feeble excuses, like a just-remembered something or other, to prolong the final parting for the night. Even a half-closed door was not a sure indication that he was on his way. He might turn at the last minute, whip off his coat, and say, “Dammit, another hour won’t hurt. I’ll say the car had a flat or something.”

“Go, Philip,” she said. “Just go.”

He shrugged huffily inside his overcoat and stepped onto the landing. She closed the door and then went into the living room to clear away the coffee things. She carried them into the kitchen, but as she placed the tray on the working surface, her arm knocked over the percolator, which was still on. Hot coffee splashed onto her leg, and the pain sent her reeling backward.

“Philip!” she cried.

She inspected herself. There was a red weal the size of a handprint on her thigh, as if she had been slapped hard.

*Philip.* Damn him. He was never there when he was needed most. That was one of the disadvantages of being a kept woman. The partner was not on call. *Christ that hurts*, she thought. She put her leg under the cold water tap and turned it on. The water would bring down her skin temperature. Afterward, she felt a little better and took several aspirin before crawling into bed. Funny, she thought, lying in bed, when she was a child they said the worst thing one could do with a burn was put cold water on it. A dry bandage was the recommended treatment. Now, *they*, whoever *they* were, had decided to reverse the treatment completely. The world was controlled by whims. The last thing she remembered before she fell asleep was that her leg still hurt her.

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The flight to Brasilia was long and uncomfortable, but Anita was excited, not only by the thought of the impending operation, but by the idea of being in South America.

She made her visits during the next day and took in the nightlife of the city in the evening. There was no real enjoyment in it for her though, because she wanted to share it all with Philip, and he was several thousand miles away.

She telephoned him, but the instrument had always been impersonal to her. She could not feel close to him, even while she was listening to his vaguely distorted voice.

“Philip . . . it’s Anita.”

An echo of her voice followed each word and then a long, deep silence in which it seemed to her that the ears of the world were tuned in to their private conversation.

“. . . lo, darling ... are you?” Parts of his speech were lost to her. It was a distressing business. She wanted to reach out and touch him, not exchange banalities over thousands of miles. Damn, what was that clicking? She could not hear him properly.

“Fine, everything’s fine,” she said.

It sounded hollow, flat. There was more of the same.

“Look after yourself,” he finished, after a very unsatisfactory five minutes. When she replaced the receiver she felt further away from him than before he call had begun. Hell, it was supposed to bring them closer, not emphasize the vast distance that separated them. She needed him desperately. If she had asked him, he would have come running, but there was no real excuse—not one of which he would approve. Just a longing for his company; which was almost a physical hurt inside her.

The flight to the hospital, over the dark-green back of prehistoric jungles, was short but not uneventful.

They flew low enough in the small aircraft for her to study the moody rivers, the sudden clearings studded with huts, the forests pressing down a personal night beneath their impenetrable layers of foliage. Down there were big cats, deadly snakes, spiders the size of soup plates, and alligators with skins like tank tracks.

On landing, she went straight to the hospital. It was a small, white building on the outskirts of the town, surrounded by gardens with trees of brilliant hues. The color of the blossoms was so light and buoyant, it seemed that only the buried roots held the splendid trees to the earth: Should the roots be severed, they would rise slowly like balloons, to take her up into the atmosphere.

Anita’s fanciful thoughts, she knew, stemmed from her desire to steer herself away from considering the forthcoming operation. When she was confronted by the surgeon, however, she knew she would have to face up to the ordeal. His office was on the second floor. He had switched off his air conditioner and flung windows and balcony doors open wide, letting in the smell of vegetation. She could see out, over the balcony and beyond the hospital gardens. The light seemed to gather near the edge of the dark jungle, as if the forest perimeter was a dam to hold back the day, to stop its bright wave rolling in to defile the old trees and ancient, overgrown temples.

The surgeon spoke; his words, perhaps subconsciously, were timed exactly to coincide with the metronomic clicking of the auxiliary overhead fan.

“You realize,” he said, “there will be a great deal of pain.”

He was an elderly American with a soft accent and gentle eyes, but she had difficulty in not looking down at his hands. Those narrow fingers, as white as driftwood with continual scrubbing, would soon be cracking her bones. They were strong-looking hands, and the arms to which they were joined, powerful. Many limbs had been purposefully broken with cold, calculated accuracy, by those hands.

“We can only give you drugs up to a certain point. The whole operation is a long business—a series of operations in fact—and we don’t want to send you out a morphine addict.”

She nodded. “I understand.”

*What sort of instruments are used?* she wanted to ask, but was too afraid of the answer to actually do so.

She imagined ugly steel clamps, vises, and mechanical hammers that were fitted with a precision more suited to a factory jig than a medical instrument. This is the way we break your bones. *We screw this here, that there—can you feel the cold metal against your skin? The plates gripping the bones?—then, once we have lined it up and in position — whap!— down comes the weight between the guide blocks and crack! goes the bone. Easy, isn’t it?*

“Of course, once we’re finished with you, you will be ... ah, even more beautiful than you can imagine.”

“That’s what I want. I don’t care about the pain so long as the result is good.”

“Not *good* but *breathtaking*. We’ll straighten out any defects in the limbs, give you a jawline that Cleopatra would envy, small feet, slender hands. We’ll also graft a little flesh here and there. Take away any excess. The eyes, we can do much with the eyes. And we’ll have to break those fingers, one or two of them ... am I being too blunt?”

“No, no.” She had paled, she knew, at the word *break*. The other words were fine. She could take terms like *straighten the limbs*—but *break* had a force behind it that shook her confidence.

“I’ll be all right,” she said. “It must be the journey, the heat or something. Please don’t worry. Please go on.”

Her body was alive with feeling, as if electricity were coursing through her veins instead of blood. She concentrated on his words as he began to describe what her experience would be, to ensure, he said, that she knew *exactly* what to expect. If she wished, she could leave now, and there would be no charge.

Outside the window, the birds were singing, and she concentrated not on his descriptions of the forthcoming mutilations of her body but on their songs.

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At first the pain was a patchy, dull feeling, its location in her body specific to certain areas, like her forearms, which were the first to be broken. An aching that was difficult but not impossible to bear.

At night, when she was left alone, she could feel the pain throbbing and pulsing in the various parts of her limbs. Later, it developed a sharpness and spread like a field fire through her whole anatomy, until there was no pinpointing its source.

The pain was her, she was the pain. It reached a pitch and intensity that filled her with a terror she had never before thought possible, could not have imagined in her worst nightmares. It had shape and form and had become a tangible thing that had banished her psyche, had taken over completely her whole being. There was nothing inside her skin but the beast pain: no heart, no brain, no flesh, no bones, no soul. Just the beast.

It was *unbearable*, and she refused to bear it. She tried, with all her willpower, to remove it from her body. It was then that the pain began to sing to her. It called in the birds from beneath their waxen leaves, the fabric blossoms: It summoned the night singers, the small, green tree frogs and the booming bulls from their mudbank trumpets; it persuaded the chitchat lizards to enter in, and the insects to abandon the bladed grasses for its sake. When it had gathered together its choirs, the beast pain sang to her. It sang unholy hymns with mouths of needle teeth, and the birds, frogs, and insects sang its song. Gradually, over the many days, she felt the sharp sweetness of their music giving her a new awareness, lifting her to a new, higher plane of experience, until there came a time when she was dependent upon their presence.

Tomorrow they would break her legs. She lay back in her bed, unable to move her head because of the clamps on her jaw. Her arms were

completely healed. The plaster had left them pale and thin, with her skin flaking off, but the doctor assured her they would soon look normal. Better than normal, of course. Then her jaw had been reshaped. That was *almost* healed.

The surgeon was insistent she wait for her legs to be remodeled, even though she told him she wanted the process hurried so that she could get back to Philip. *Her legs.*

She knew the worst pain was yet to come. Then, of course, there were the minor operations: her nose, fingers, toes, and ears. (Afterward she could wear her hair shorter. Would not need to cover those ugly ears, which would then be beautiful.) The surgeon had also mentioned scraping away some of the bone above her eyes, where there were slight bulges. (She had never noticed them, but he had obviously done so.) Also there were her shoulder blades to adjust—the scapulae—she was even beginning to learn the Latin names. . . .

*Sweet pain! What delicious strains came from its small mouths. Sing to me, she whispered, sing!* She needed more and more.

“The hands haven’t gone too well; we’re going to have to rework them,” he said.

She smiled, as much as the wire brace would allow.

“If you have to.”

“You’re a brave woman.”

“I try to be,” she replied, drifting off into her other world, the *real* world, where she became herself. Her actual *self*.

In there, deep inside, lay the quintessential spark of being, where she was pure *Anita*. To reach that spark, it was necessary to use an agent—drugs, medication, will, faith, religion, or perhaps *pain*. Pain was her vehicle to that interior world, that inscape that made the rest of life seem a wasteland of experience. There was the power, the energy of birth. The cold release of death. Heady. Unequivocally the center of the universe. So strange to find that all else revolved around her. That nothing existed that was not derived from her. Even Philip. She was the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth. She was void, she was matter, she was light.

Anita and her pain.

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“How do you feel?” asked the surgeon.

She smiled. “I really do feel like a new woman. How do I look?”

“See for yourself. . . .” He indicated the mirror on the wall, but she had already studied herself for hours before the mirror in her room. The scars were now invisible, the blemishes and bruises gone. Blue-black skin had been replaced by her normal cream complexion. And now? Now her features were . . . breathtaking, yes. Her whole body was absolutely perfect in its proportions. This was what she had desired for so many years. Beauty, absolute.

“I’m very pleased,” she said. “I really haven’t the words to express my thanks.”

He held up a hand. “I’ve been adequately rewarded,” he said. “We don’t do it for love of beauty— although I admit to being proud of my art. And I must congratulate you on your courage. You withstood the pain with as much bravery as I’ve ever seen.”

She shrugged. “It isn’t something I’d like to go through again,” she lied, “but I think it’s been worth it. It *has* been worth it,” she hastily amended.

They shook hands.

“You’re a beautiful woman,” he said, in a voice that suggested he had forgotten he had created her.

On the drive away, she barely looked at the trees, still dripping with colors. Their blooms no longer interested her. Nor did the birds upon their branches. She had her own colors, her own songbirds.

Philip was waiting by the exit of the airport arrival lounge. She saw him from the far side of the room.

He was looking directly at her, and she realized that he did not recognize her. He looked away and began searching the faces of the other passengers.

She began walking toward him. Twice more he looked at her, as if expecting a sign from her to tell him she was Anita, then back to the other passengers.

She noticed his expression was expectant but calm. He thought he had no need to be anxious. Anita was supposed to declare herself. As she drew closer she *almost* wavered in her purpose.

Her heart flooded with emotion. God, he was her *life*. Never would she have the same feelings for any other man. He was everything to her. Philip. Even the name was enough to fill her heart with the desire, the passion, the tender feelings of love.

She needed him, wanted him above all else except. . . .

She studied his eyes, his face, his quizzical expression as she passed him and then went through the exit, her feelings choking her. She was leaving him. She wanted him desperately, but she was leaving him—and the delicious pain, the emotional agony, was exquisite. She nurtured the hurt inside her, listening to the music that ran through her veins. This was beauty: the delight, the ecstasy of spiritual pain, even sweeter than a physical hurt. Her songbirds would be with her till death, and her indulgence in the music they created washed through her whole being and made her complete, made the whole of existence complete, for everyone—even Philip.