

# Girl on a String

By  
Vanessa Wells

A cardinal sees its reflection every afternoon in Letty's window. The bird flies its pointed red head into the glass over and over for three hours everyday. Letty's grandmother says cardinals bring good luck. Her good luck keeps trying to come in through a closed window.

She leaves her small apartment at the beach and boards a plane with Bear. They fly overnight to Italy. When he invites her, she clears her schedule. Spends money to fly anywhere, be with him any place. She loves him.

Flying over the Atlantic, she walks on eggshells and talks around his ego. She takes small breaths to steady her voice and her heart when speaking with him. She does most of the talking—empty and naked words. Letty wears a Moroccan skirt cut just below her knees, layers of pretty pink satin.

Letty sits close to Bear, resting her hand on his wrist, perfectly made up, ready for his detached embrace. *Say something witty, say something witty, say something to make him fall in love with you.* Bear glances up from his book.

“Why are you so dressed up? You do know we're going to be on this plane for eight hours, don't you?”

She gives half a smile and flips through her magazine.

Letty is strawberry blond hair green eyes with yellow flecks. Medium height a sprinkle of freckles. A scar on her right knee from a trampoline accident when she was in the sixth grade. Wavy short hair. Nose that juts out. A girl who doesn't wear underwear.

They get off the plane in Rome and drive three and a half hours to Trivento. They settle into his family's villa.

In bed that first night; she touches Bear's face. Beautiful crinkles around his eyes, brilliant blue and cold. He takes control at the small of her back. Eyes dart and she is ready to submit. A subtle forced intimacy.

He climbs inside of her like he is staying in a nice hotel. Rips away the sheets and throws his head on the soft down pillows. But

the sheets will be rolled up on the floor in the morning, forgotten, as he sleeps in and barely makes the noon check out.

Letty is not a nice hotel, not even an apartment. Letty is every girl swinging on the pendulum between a suburban house, 2.4 kids, a tail-wagging chocolate lab or a double wide, eight kids, a chained Doberman pinscher who's foaming at the mouth.

Bear will leave before the noon check out. Maybe the down pillows aren't soft enough or maybe there is an apartment downtown with cheap rent and new paint in a good location convenient for his life.

She waits for him to speak, giddy and uncomfortable. *This is it. He's going to tell me he's in love with me.* She moves her fingers along his chest.

"I like you because we have companionship and sex with no commitment or intimacy," he tells her.

Letty's sadness fills the room, soaks in like oil on the century old armoire, drips like lacquer on the cold marble, and seeps down into her crumpled skirt on the floor.

At the top of the mountain in Trivento, a place named after the three winds that converge there, Letty drinks a cup of wine. A single rose bush blooms in the convent's garden across the cobblestones. A fury of pink flutters in the wind and stumbles down three hundred and sixty-five steps to the village below. The petals dance with the wind becoming: we. Letty wants to be: we like them. She wants to flutter freely into someone else. She leaves Italy, leaves Bear. She leaves windy fragrant we.

Back home in Jacksonville, Letty drinks her thoughts down deep. The bartender serves her another margarita, and the guy sitting to her right begins to make sense. Nice hands with hair around the knuckles and a smile that looks honest to her on this particular night. Anton gives her a ride because the world is spinning and she can't drive her thirteen blocks home. Maybe ten she rationalizes but not thirteen.

Bright afternoon sunlight blares in through the bedroom window. Letty moves her lips and mouth a few times: wet cotton balls.

"How's it going?" Anton, the stranger, strokes her arm.

"I think a cat jumped in through the window last night and died

in my mouth,” she chuckles, still a little tanked.

“Last night was fun,” he leans forward to kiss her.

“I was *wasted*,” she dodges his lips and climbs out of bed.

She heads for the bathroom. Closing the door behind her, she fights back anxiety and nausea as a hangover sets in and pieces of the night before burn the back of her mind. Brushing her teeth, cold water, and toothpaste on her gums are both refreshing and sickening. She leans over the sink, spits, and rinses. Dizzy as she stands straight.

She climbs back in bed with stranger Anton and offers an awkward smile. His body shifts next to her.

“So,” he strokes his ample belly, “I should get going. I’ll call you?” He sits up and Letty stares at the excessive hair on his back. The hair seems to sweep in circles and end at the nape of his neck. Twenty tiny hurricanes of follicles climbing up to his neck.

“Sure, call me sometime,” she says, “I would walk you out but you know. Feeling a bit hung over, best to stay in bed.”

He leaves without a number.

She falls back in bed.

She pulls the car over. Sirens fill her ears and eyes. The cop walks up to her car. He taps on her door. She tries to reach to roll down the window, but her fingers lay limp on the wheel. She tries again, this time concentrating all of her energy into her left pinky finger. He taps harder, obviously angered by her inaction. Her pinky nail quivers but she can’t move an ounce of herself. Now he is banging on the window. She tries to yell but her throat is a vacuum and sound dies before it’s ever born. He takes his flashlight and smashes the window. Glass splays onto her face, into her eyes, shards find their way into her half-open mouth. Letty uses every point of energy in her universe to move her left pinky finger.

She blinks. The tapping continues. The cardinal is dutifully at her window slamming his beak into the panes. Letty touches her face, blinks again, swallows hard. No glass. She wiggles each finger. She wiggles her left pinky finger with all of her soul. She climbs out of bed and heads for the living room.

She smokes a bowl and hopes last night and her headache will fade. Letty picks up the book her roommate’s reading. She glances at the title, *Almost Space: A Collection of Stories*. She opens to

the first page.

“Death kills the living more than the dead. It shaves the edges off our existence. Habits and vices once coddled in the warmth of our sheltered personalities now stick out like awkward black feathers oiled slick with the dirt of the world around it. Time ended and ebbed life to the dusty periphery of the present. I woke up one morning,”

She closes the book mid-sentence.

“Fucking hell,” Letty vents to the empty room, “why does it have to be about death? Why does everybody got to write death? Death and coffee. People are either dying or drinking a cup of coffee.”

She opens to the middle of the book.

“A few days later, I meet up with Mona for coffee. Her skin is radiant. She is sitting in front of Starbucks smiling as I walk up. She crosses her long tanned legs as I sit down. The sun is setting and there is a slight breeze coming from the west.”

Fucking coffee. Letty sets down the book and smokes another bowl.

Letty goes for a drive. She heads south.

Seven hours later she’s on the Florida turnpike outside of Miami heading for Key West. Letty parks at Eva’s house and walks up Elizabeth Street to the dock. Eva waves, and Letty walks up the boat ramp. Beautiful Eva, in a navy blue polo t-shirt and khaki shorts, pours champagne into a plastic cup for Letty.

“Letty! How are you?”

The girls embrace.

“I’m good, just thought I’d clear my head and get some miles underneath me.”

“What do you feel like getting into tonight?”

“Let’s have a couple drinks when you’re finished working.”

“I’ll be ready in ten minutes”

Eva washes the boat and divvies out the tips between the captain and herself. She locks up the boat, and the girls head to the Green Parrot.

Smoky dark bluegrass band. Horns/horns/horns.

Eva buys the first round. They drink and listen to the band.

“Come on.”

Eva grabs Letty and pulls her on the dance floor. Two fall in close together. Eva grabs Letty's left hand, twirls her around, spins her out, and catches her from behind. Her. Laughter. Another round of drinks. Letty buys this time.

Letty is cozy drunk again. Eva talks finance with the bartender. The three of them head back to Eva's after last call. The bartender, Cyrus, grabs a bottle of rum from the liquor room.

Ambles. Amble. Ambling down Elizabeth wasted. Back to Eva's.

Bartender Cyrus plops down on the blue couch with big soft pillows. Eva twists the cap off a beer and sits down next to him. Letty levitates in the overstuffed chair and focuses on the water ring on the coffee table to keep the room from falling falls fall into pieces. Bartender Cyrus fumbles for Eva. Pulls at her tank top her sarong with the persistence of a seven-year-old in a grocery store trying to get his mother to buy the good cereal.

Eva lights a bowl. The bowl floats from hand to hand, mouth to mouth.

"Get the fuck off me!"

Fumbly bumbly Bartender Cyrus is on top of Eva with the eagerness of a five-year-old boy next to a mechanical pony with a quarter in his pocket.

"Out! Get the fuck out!"

Bartender Cyrus leaves with sunken cheeks and a look of despair not unlike a little toddler that has just wrecked his tricycle.

Letty curls up on the soft couch next to Eva and rests her hand on Eva's knee. Eva leans over and kisses Letty like she wants to swallow her up, feeding her existence for an entire year. Letty turns to syrup.

Letty and Eva climb three floors and sink into a feather bed with one thousand and seven pillows.

They begin to kiss. Their clothes fly out the open window. Tasting Eva reminds Letty of eating nasturtiums for the first time. New, soft, spicy. Except she is not spicy. Only salty. Giggles and shrieks escape the fibers of a tightly woven Guatemalan quilt. Finger, tongues, toes touch as their bodies are suspended in a space of bliss and relief for that magical hour before the rooster.

Dusty sunlight filters in the open skylight like smoke. Letty's head weighs more than her body this morning. Red numbers on the black clock read 9:36. They lay entwined and begin to stir. Embarrassed laughs and bad breath. Each climbs out of bed for a cigarette and thoughts of breakfast.

Bacon grease spits out of a large skillet on the stove and Letty breaks eggs into a glass bowl. Eva walks in with the paper.

“Coffee.”

Eva pours a cup of coffee as Letty brushes against her. Eva recoils to avoid her skin.

Driving up 95 back to Jacksonville, Letty listens to the magnificent suffocating sound of bullfrogs. She is empty. She wants to be filled...by anyone. we. Poured into a glass. Drank down with satisfied lips into a mouth no longer thirsty because of her.

She walks into her room. The cardinal perches on a branch outside. His head bobs up and down, his wings jut out, and he comes toward the window. Thunk. Again, thunk. The bird rests on the branch shaking his feathers.

Letty notices a dead wasp caught between the panes. The wasp that buzzed around for its eternity until finally choking in the small space. Letty reaches over and tries to turn the rusty lock. Brick colored dust flakes off and finds its way under her fingernails. She tries to turn the stubborn latch. With a snap, the lock breaks away. She lifts the window. The wasp disintegrates.

The cardinal flies to the highest branch. A few minutes later he settles back at his post next to the open window. Letty lies on her bed and watches as he bobs and shakes.

The cardinal springs through the open space and alights on the ceiling fan. The bird plummets off the fan and strikes the mirror, shattering it. Letty laughs wildly. The bird, resting on the dresser, looks in her direction, seemingly startled. Letty covers her face with a pillow, still chuckling.

She approaches the cardinal. She reaches out and grabs him. The bird squawks and pecks at her hands. Tiny claws jut out and scrape the inside of Letty's wrists. Thin trickles of blood drip down her skin. Letty lets go but a string now connects them.

The cardinal stretches wings and flies out the window. The

momentum of the cardinal's flight pulls her along. Letty stumbles with bloody wrists. She trips and gets up. Her grass stained knees are bruised. The cardinal is a kite floating on her string. The thread becomes frayed because of her white-knuckled grip. The string pops. The cardinal ascends.