



Vacant Possession

by Tina Rath

"I'll leave you to deal with your mother, then," said Gerald, as he was half-way down the stairs, knowing very well that he would be safely out of the front door before Sylvia could say, "Don't you dare," or, "She's your problem too, you know," or make any other perfectly reasonable response. Of course, if she could have said any such thing to her husband she could have dealt with her mother, too. And she had never been able to. Not even now when she was a mother herself, and soon-to-be grandmother. Of course, there were unusual circumstances... She squared her shoulders and went up the stairs to her mother's room.

Her timid knock produced no response at all. Her equally timid call - "Mother! Mother, are you there? Can I come in?" - produced only a faint whimper, which, with unusual firmness, she took as permission to enter.

The signs were not good. Her mother was sitting in her armchair by the window, a photograph album on her knees, a handkerchief clasped in her right hand. As Sylvia entered she dabbed it to her perfectly dry cheek.

"I heard what that husband of yours said," she announced accusingly. Yet another bad sign. Gerald had lost his name and become 'that husband of yours'. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Mother..." Sylvia usually allowed her to get away with this, but the situation had become desperate. So had she. "Mother, we really must talk about it, I'm afraid." Why did her voice sound so thin and - yes - childish? Why did her mother always do this to her?

"I'm not leaving this house," her mother stated. "Fifty years I've lived here." Her voice broke, the tears genuine now, her lips trembling too much to let her speak.

"But mother," Sylvia took a quick, mean advantage of her momentary breakdown, "we want you to come with us. Wouldn't you like to move to the sea-side? And be near Marianne and the baby?"

"I've always hated the sea!" her mother snapped. "Always. Those holidays, when we took you to Bognor, they were misery to me. Of course I never let on..."

No, thought Sylvia, she certainly had not. She'd given a really remarkable imitation of someone enjoying herself no end.

"Cruel, those winds off the sea are. They won't do you any good, now you're getting older. Crippled, that's what you'll be, crippled with rheumatism before you've been there a month. And all to be an unpaid baby-sitter for that daughter of yours."

This was the worst sign of all. Marianne, beautiful, blonde, married Marianne was her grandmother's favourite. She had never been 'that daughter of yours' before.

"I won't be doing any baby-sitting if I'm crippled with rheumatism," Sylvia snapped. "Perhaps Marianne will have to look after me."

"I never asked any of my children to take care of me," her mother announced.

No, thought Sylvia, you just sat there and expected us to do it. And we did. She tried again:

"Mother, we really, really have to sell this house and move. If we don't do it now..."

"Well, sell it then! Can I stop you?"

"Of course you can! You do! Who's going to buy a haunted house!"

She stopped, with a gasp, pressing her hand to her chest. She'd done it! She'd used the 'h' word to her own mother! Lightning did not strike. Her mother stared at her as if she could not believe her ears, and dabbed at her eyes again with her ghostly handkerchief gripped in her semi-transparent fingers.

"And," Sylvia continued, desperation making her bold, "I know I'm the only one who can see you, but you do - make yourself felt! We've had dozens of people looking round the place, and none of them ever come back. Some of them think it's damp, and some - and I suppose they're the psychic ones - say it has a really nasty atmosphere. An Unhappy House, that's what they say. And I know Gerald never believed in you, and thinks it's my Time of Life as he will call it, which makes me think you're still here, but now he's threatened to find an exorcist..."

Unwisely, she stopped for breath and her mother was able to snarl:

"Well, let him! Let him find some Holy Joe of a vicar to drive me out of the house I came to when I was first married..."

"And which you always complained was too small and poky," said a voice that was only too familiar. Sylvia looked round in despair to see Aunt Maud; Aunt Maud dressed for a visit in her royal purple suit, and her fiercest hat. Aunt Maud, whom she'd seen only yesterday, lying in hospital...

"Oh auntie," she wailed, "you're not..."

"Dead," Maud boomed. "'Course I am. They'll be phoning you soon, to let you know. It's taking them a while because they've got my notes mixed up, and they're breaking the news to a lady in Brixton, with an auntie that's very much alive, and eating her tea as we speak, but they'll sort it out eventually."

"I'm so sorry," Sylvia began, and her sorrow was quite genuine. Not only had she rather liked Aunt Maud, but she really did not want any more dead relatives in the house. Maud interrupted her firmly.

"Well, don't be. It was quite quick and completely painless. Peacefully, in my sleep, as they say."

"You're looking very well," Sylvia said nervously.

"It's wonderful how death improves your health," Maud agreed. "And your looks." She gave herself what Sylvia could only think

of as a shake, and became a teen-age girl in a white, full skirted frock, patterned with royal blue roses. A wide patent leather belt - also royal blue - cinched her impossibly tiny waist, and a mass of blonde curls tumbled over her shoulders.

"Oh, Aunt Maud! I never realised that you were so pretty!" Sylvia exclaimed.

"She wasn't!" snapped Maud's sister from her armchair. "You never were as slim at that, Maud Jackson. And you weren't a blonde, either!"

"Well, I am now," Maud replied cheerfully. "Now, what's all this about the house, Daisy? You moaned like hell about it when you first moved in. You said it was old, and dark, and gave you the heebie jeebies. You wanted one of those nice new prefabs."

"Oh, how can you be so wicked..."

"And Arthur's had a lovely new prefab waiting for you ever since he passed on. But are you interested? No, you just want to hang around and make your daughter's life a misery."

"Arthur..." Daisy repeated uncertainly.

"Look!" Maud swept her hand and the wall behind her rolled up like a blind. Sylvia and her mother found themselves staring at a pristine prefab, surrounded by a garden of mixed vegetables and flowers that was clearly someone's pride and joy. The front door was open, and in the doorway...

"Fluffy!" said Daisy softly. "It's Fluffy. I broke my heart when he died. I swore I'd never have another cat..."

"And all the time he was waiting for her," Maud said scathingly.

Fluffy, who had been sitting on the doormat, engaged in some intimate laundry, glanced up at the sound of their voices. He yawned, and went back to his washing. And a young man came out of the front door, and squinted into the sunlight.

"Daisy!" he said, unbelievably, then, "Daisy, come home, you stubborn old whatsit!"

"That's never Arthur!" said Daisy. Her voice betrayed none of the softening with which she had greeted the appearance of Fluffy.

Sylvia, who had, naturally, never seen her father as a very young man, would not have recognised him either. Nor did she believe that he had really looked quite so like the young Errol Flynn. But her mother was wavering to her feet. She stepped forward, into that green and glowing landscape, and as she did so the years fell away from her too, and it was an interesting - but undeniably attractive - mixture of Vivien Leigh, Rita Hayworth, and the young Daisy herself who was gathered into her husband's embrace while the scene faded into Sylvia's familiar wall-paper.

She had been rather hoping that Maud would leave too, but she did not. For a moment Sylvia thought she had simply exchanged one ghost for another. But Maud flourished her hand again, and quite a different scene appeared: not a heavenly version of the allotment, where, Sylvia seemed to recall, Maud's husband Harold had spent most of his life, but a really plush bar somewhere - possibly America, because there were a lot of American officers in the foreground (but no sign, as far as she could see, of Uncle Harold) who waved and cheered as Maud hurried to meet them, her dress turning into something tight and sequinned and wholly unsuitable as she did so...

And then the wallpaper re-formed again, and Sylvia knew that the house was really empty at last. And of course, she told herself, it always had been empty. The HRT was beginning to work at last, and the illusions had all vanished. Her mother had never been there: she had certainly not gone to spend the afterlife in a kind of paradisaal prefab with her husband and Fluffy, and as for Aunt Maud she was undoubtedly still lying in her hospital bed - certainly not preparing to spend eternity looking like Jessica Rabbit, and drinking cocktails with American officers.

Somewhere, downstairs, the phone began to ring.