

# A Speck of Dust

---

MARY KAY ROSS

*Une femme obsédée par la propreté et abandonnée par son mari se découvre une autre vie et un nouveau monde dans ses rêves.*

“You see, I mean ... my problem is, well, my wife is just a cleaning nut. I’m telling you, it’s driving me crazy and it’s getting worse all the time. It used to be the worst of it was our furniture was all covered in plastic, like you know, you couldn’t sit down anywhere and shoes—oh, shoes. You could never wear those in the house. But now! If I’m smoking, she follows me around with an ashtray. If I go to the fridge for a beer, she follows me around with a towel under it. I’m telling you, it’s driving me crazy. You gotta help me. What am I going to do?”

Heidi pulled her head out of the oven, wiped a speck of Easy Off from her nose and turned around to stare at her kitchen radio in amazement. There was no doubt about it. That voice, whining, self-pitying, somehow shot through with vulnerability, was unmistakable. It grated on her nerves because there was something so messy about it. And now here it was, speaking at her through the

radio ... speaking to her from her favourite talk-show program, *Let It All Hang Out*. Without rising, she crawled across the floor and quickly switched off the radio, not waiting for, not wanting to hear, the host’s advice. No doubt about it. That voice belonged to her own husband, Jack. And he had been talking about her. Complaining about her for all the world to hear, for all the world ... oh, my God, the neighbours.

Heidi jumped up and ran to the window. She peeked through the curtains to Maureen’s house. She’d be listening, you could just bet she would and soon it would be all over the neighbourhood. What an embarrassment—worse than an embarrassment, a disloyalty. And such an exaggeration. Hadn’t she said to him that most men would be proud to have a house so spotless they could bring a guest home anytime, any old time they wanted? Yes, hadn’t she said that to him just two weeks ago? And he had answered, “Okay, okay, but how can I bring a guy home when you treat everyone like a speck of unwanted dust? Hell, we can’t sit anywhere; we can’t smoke in the house. Even in the summer when it’s nice, we can

hardly sit in the garden without you fussing over us and worrying we’ll tread a little mud onto the patio. I just don’t understand you anymore, Heidi. God, the times I’d like to take your clothes off, they just seem to look back at me and stand at attention.” And he had turned and walked away from her.

He didn’t try to take her clothes off much anymore, that was for sure. It was all right with her too. Let others discuss the vagaries of sexual passion, its tragedies or joys. Sex, to Heidi, had become just another cleaning problem. She thought bleakly of crumpled sheets, dirty bathtubs, sodden towels. No, she shuddered. The less of that, the better. But still, she admitted, as she got back on her knees in front of the oven and began to scrub again, she remembered vaguely a time when the compulsion to clean was not so strong, a time when she might even have enjoyed the taste of sweat on Jack’s body. But this time was so long gone, she was unsure whether it was fantasy or memory.

She shrugged and set her mind back on the oven. She scrubbed with dedication and purpose and, at last, the oven glowed to her satisfaction so

bright and shiny it could have starred in a commercial. She sat back on her heels and rubbed the small of her back, then stretched. There was nothing so satisfying as a job well done.

Later, she could never imagine what had drawn her attention to the front door. A slight noise? Footsteps? A sense of inner breeze? Someone else's presence? She went to the front door and saw the envelope. It was addressed to her. When she opened it, the note said only, "Heidi, I can't stand it anymore. Goodbye, Jack."

She sat in the living room chair, looking out the window, the note folded neatly on her lap. Maureen went by walking her dog—that filthy thing. Children skipped home from school. Office workers returned from work. At last day deepened into twilight and still Heidi hadn't moved. She slept that night in her chair, afraid to face the empty bed.

The next day, stunned but functioning, Heidi called Jack's work only to be told he had quit. She walked to the bank. The manager, brusque but sympathetic, told her that Jack had arranged to have some money deposited in their joint account at the beginning of each month. He had given the manager no explanation and the manager had not thought to ask for one. Heidi walked home slowly. It was obvious that her husband had been planning to leave for some time. She accepted this as she accepted almost everything but the presence of dirt. She spent the rest of the day cleaning and then, exhausted, went to bed.

That night a speck of dust, forbidden in that home and as yet inarticulate, circled the bed on which Heidi lay. It moved cautiously, then more erratically, along the soft curves of her body, sketching a meandering path from toe, to knee, to thigh. It wove ever-deepening circles from abdomen, to breasts, to chin until at last it settled longingly on the high

ridge of cheekbone just beneath her left eyelid. Heidi murmured as a soft breath of desire touched her body, and pushed herself further into the comforting mattress.

As the speck of dust moved along her cheekbone toward her nose, Heidi saw Jack clearly. He was striding across a ridge of the Andes mountains, heading toward a silent, solitary peak. He paused and rested himself as he leaned against a twisted rock. His face was alight and alert; she had never seen him so consumed, so intensely alive. With passion and purpose he began to scale the peak just as the speck of dust began the climb up Heidi's nose. Heidi, her breath coming in short, sharp gasps, her brain dizzy from the high altitude, felt herself hurled from the peak, plunging through space and time, to land, exhausted and satisfied, safe in her bed.

The next morning, Heidi awoke to the day with unaccustomed pleasure. She felt heavy yet sated and completely relaxed. She lay there a moment and savoured this unexpected feeling of contentment, this release from burden and tension. Then she bounced out of bed. She sang as she showered and dressed. She danced around the kitchen to music from the radio as she made her breakfast. She began to clean out the kitchen cupboards and found herself laughing at everything and nothing at all.

By the afternoon, the house was perfect in its pristine cleanliness and even Heidi acknowledged herself pleased with it. She became restless and grabbing her jacket, she put it on and left the house. She headed toward the library with no conscious purpose, but with ever-quickening strides. Once there, she headed as if aimed to the travel section. Her hands roamed blindly over the books on the shelf until they stopped at one clearly titled, *The Andes*. She pulled the book from the shelf and, her brow wrinkled in puzzlement, stared at the cover photo

of a ridge leading toward a lofty peak. Suddenly Jack came into the photo. He was walking on the ridge and as she stared intently at him, he stopped and turned to look at her. He was a Jack she had never known before, or at least had never allowed herself to recognize. Her heart twisted and she clutched the book tightly to her as if determined never to let it go. She stood there many moments before she shook herself out of her trance and walked to the counter to check the book out and go home.

She spent the rest of the afternoon leafing through the book, gazing at the pictures of the godlike range that was itself the kingdom of gods. She read of the mystical cities of the Incas and tried to imagine Jack there amongst the ghosts. Could he be there? It seemed so unlike Jack, whom she had always thought of as a rather cautious businessman, that her mind turned upside down at the mere idea. But he was certainly not here with her and so, she supposed, anything was possible.

That night the strange speck of dust, still forbidden but bolder now, waited only until Heidi had fallen asleep before it approached her eagerly and set about its exploration of her body. It moved with great perseverance up her inner thigh, crossed over her slightly bent leg, and braved the slope of hip into buttock. It felt as though it were travelling on a sea that curved toward the horizon, a sea of depth and solidity, a sea of golden flesh.

Jack sat astride his camel and raised his hand to his forehead to shield his eyes from the blazing sun. The desolate yet magnificent sands of the Sahara stretched before him for as far as he could see. Around him swirled the Berbers and their beasts; the manic laughter of the tribe like the clanging of their bells shouted a challenge to the power of the desert. At the signal to depart, Jack galloped

ahead, straight toward the centre of the desert, toward its gleaming heart, which seemed to him to be rounded, golden, the very sun itself. The Berbers followed, laughing, but he had set his face, eyes pointed sharp, to become another Lawrence of Arabia.

The next day Heidi again felt compelled to visit the library where she

she glanced at the book, there Jack sat, stubbornly astride his camel.

Her nights became glorious. She could hardly wait to fall asleep so that the subtle explorations of her body would begin. Her breasts became dream islands, her eyes the sheltered waters. The clearly etched lines on her palms contained prophesies of ancient Greece. Her legs flowed freely

problems in school. They talked of the new community centre that was to be built across the park. At last, Maureen blurted out, "Heidi, you look wonderful. Tell me honestly now, do you have a new lover?" Heidi smiled enigmatically but said nothing. She rose, thanked her hostess and left. "The Mona Lisa has nothing on her," Maureen thought and swiped at

---

**Maureen wondered at Heidi's new ebullience, at the strength and freedom of her purposeful stride. Maureen peeked out her window, a quizzical frown on her face. Maureen's curiosity was whetted. What could have happened since that husband of hers had left her? One thing was certain. Heidi didn't look like a deserted wife.**

---

exchanged her book on the Andes for one on the Sahara. As she walked past, her neighbour Maureen wondered at Heidi's new ebullience, at the strength and freedom of her purposeful stride. Maureen peeked out her window, a quizzical frown on her face. Heidi had always been attractive of course, with her blond hair, trim figure, and wide-set blue eyes. But she had been attractive in a prim, almost matronly way. Maureen's curiosity was whetted. What could have happened since that husband of hers had left her? One thing was certain. Heidi didn't look like a deserted wife. Maureen sniffed and turned away from the window, determined to investigate at the first opportunity.

Heidi, unaware that she had been observed, walked home as blithely as she had set off downtown. She clutched the new book on the Sahara to her breast and, once inside, looked at the photos with a mixture of awe and astonishment. Visions of Lawrence of Arabia, naturally enough, swept through her mind with the relentless quality of a desert wind. But she somehow couldn't connect these images to Jack. Jack? Lawrence of Arabia? Come on. Yet, whenever

like the great rivers of the Amazon and Nile. Her mouth was filled with the sweet wet heat of the jungle. Her hair shone silver with the hidden landscapes of the moon. Her back arched with beauty like the stars of the Milky Way. Now she knew Jack had meant it when he'd said, "You're all the world to me."

This nightly joy could not be hidden in the light of day. It burst from her, surrounding those who saw her. Most of her neighbours shrugged uncomfortably and turned their heads aside—but Maureen could wait no longer. She waylaid Heidi and scrutinized her closely. She observed Heidi's glowing, tousled hair. She saw that the blue of Heidi's eyes seemed to have deepened and those eyes, once rather blank and expressionless, now held secrets, maybe even mischievous ones. "She has a lover," Maureen decided quickly. "These trips to the library are just a front." Just as quickly, she asked Heidi in for a cup of tea.

The two women sat in the kitchen sipping their tea; Heidi lost in her own world while Maureen desperately sought to gain entrance to it. They chatted of this and that. They discussed Maureen's children and their

the teacups viciously, dropping them into the sink.

One morning Heidi awoke and stretched languorously in her bed. A smile as gleeful as the Cheshire cat's played across her face. She jumped out of bed, and turning to smooth the sheets, she noticed a small, dark speck of dust on her pillow. She clicked her teeth, pinched the speck between thumb and forefinger, and walking quickly to the kitchen wiggled her fingers over the garbage can until she was sure she'd gotten rid of it.

As soon as she had lowered the lid of the can, though, a sense of desolation swept over her, so strong that she grabbed her stomach in sudden, sharp pain. What had she done? Did that little speck of dust have anything to do with Jack? Impossible. Yet acting on instinct, not thought, she dumped the contents of the can all across her immaculate kitchen floor. She pored through the garbage like someone demented or starving but she could not recover the speck. She sat immobile on the floor, surrounded by mess. She shook her head in dismay at the futility of mourning a speck of dust. "Oh, well," she murmured as she wiped away a tear. "He always

did say I was a bit of a cleaning nut.” Then she rose slowly to her feet and crossed to the cupboard to get her kitchen mop.

*Mary Kay Ross has worked in publishing, public relations, social work, broadcasting, and teaching. Having worked as an assistant editor for a publishing firm in England for several years, she returned to Toronto and was hired as a story editor for The Braden Beat, Global Television. She also worked for CBC Radio as a broadcaster on shows such as Morningside and The Judy Show. For TV Ontario, she co-hosted and wrote three series called Beyond the Fridge, Ferguson, Short and Ross, and Behind the Shield. She loves reading, dogs and cats, and the joys of her life are her grandchildren: Napoleon, Ronin, and Juliette. This is her first novel. is the author of Blind in One Eye, published by Inanna Publications in 2011.*

## JOANNA M. WESTON

### Washing Up

my gloved hands stir foam  
lift and wipe a plate a spoon  
as I stare into the falling dusk

mindlessly place dishes  
in the draining rack  
watch the gathering dark

drop cleaned knives and forks  
in the cutlery holder  
gaze through fading light

I fumble a serving dish  
against the edge of the sink  
come awake in the gloaming

*Joanna M. Weston's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*

## CHRISTINA FOISY

### I am a truck driver's underarm

I spit my gum onto the curb, and  
you criticize my civility, and so we walk on  
endings like sidewalks. I have grown tired  
of dreaming of walking away. Lying  
beside you is pedestrian. I imagine  
the gentle ways I could say goodbye.  
I chew each sentence until dawn,  
blowing smoke into your eyes. Perhaps,  
I would start by saying that I should go  
home. I have domestic things to do,  
like laundry and baking. Although I can't  
decide: what is more important?  
I smell awful, almost wild, around you  
and your lavender and bergamot oils,  
your tea-leaves, and Spanish pastries.  
I smell like the underarm of a truck  
driver who cheats on his wife and eats  
*crème de maron* between motels  
and backseats. Perhaps, there is  
an ounce of refined taste in me,  
but I have swallowed it too. Or  
maybe I could be a chain-restaurant  
waitress named Sonia, who chews  
gum all day and doesn't even spit it out  
for a cigarette. I feel for Sonia and the underarm  
her sweaty blouses, his heart-attacks. Sometimes,  
I wear Sonia's scent, like a woman who waits  
in a damp parking lot for a truck driver's lift.  
But not today, I will walk home the long way.  
You touch my untied hair, hold strands  
between your lips. You deserve a nice girl,  
in clean clothes, who doesn't spit  
her gum out when she is tired of it,  
a girl who doesn't share bad dreams  
or body odor.

*Christina Foisy's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*