



# **GHOST BIRD**

**\* \* \***

**BY LIZ MACKIE**

**[WWW.FAMEPUNK.COM](http://WWW.FAMEPUNK.COM)**

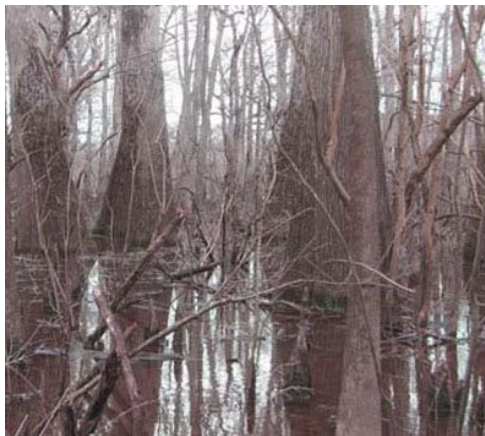
**© 2011**

For Sandra Bullock

Priscilla and David had been together eight years. Every once in a while she liked to catch him in a false dichotomy. This happened as I say not all the time and it seemed only to happen on weekends or vacations. The way the light fell over a late unhurried breakfast must be what provoked her to notice David's habit, really, as Priscilla thought about it, of over-peppering their discourse with false dichotomies. She'd always been among the brightest in a morning classroom.

David was a talker. Priscilla had passed through several phases of being very grateful for this fact about him. She knew a few women whose mates were inarticulate men and in her life had seen the lives of many others. She was in

grade school in the neighbor's kitchen where she'd heard it treated as a joke: *I do the talking, he takes out the trash.* The expressionless Mister who never said anything went out the back door, hunched, and Priscilla had never forgotten her relief that he'd left the room. Now at her age she thought silent men were mostly disappointed and that they were pouting. Far along into our golden age of motion picture sound, every one had had the opportunity to hear how talking is or can be done; yet some still grunted. Priscilla had known the common urges she developed to slap people coalesce very rapidly around the persons of men too silent. Her friends, female relatives, really all women deserved the courtesy of frequent and scrupulously thoughtful answers. How disappointing other women had to feel, no matter how indifferent or exultant or





Zen their phrases: *I'm used to it. I do the talking. He's there.* In between her times of outright gratitude that David was talkative, Priscilla remembered to be grateful.

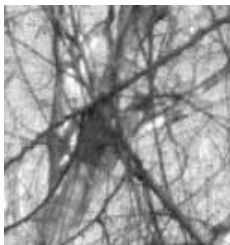
But they could be out walking around the neighborhood, going shop to shop after breakfast in a crowded restaurant where the breakfasts were too heavy, or hiking the edge of a lake or a pond, some body of fresh water, following a narrow trail along uneven banks through stands of pine trees and saplings and ferns; they could be driving north, or waiting in a line. They could be discussing almost anything: their families, the news, some startling fact or anecdote they'd come across, the sex lives of their friends. Priscilla was opinionated. David, equally opinionated, was much less willing to admit he was. Some question remains as to whether he



ever admitted it. They would have been talking together all morning, all day; by each of them many words would have been spoken. Then it might happen that David would ask Priscilla how, for instance, *King Kong* hadn't been more successful if it was a better movie than *Avatar*.

At which point she would remark upon that's being a false dichotomy.

Another sort of man she could never abide, Priscilla thought, were the mimsies who agreed with everything the woman said no matter how asinine. This, too, life with David spared her. To live as if in jelly with something jelly-like and only vaguely reflective: she shuddered, felt ill, forbore to imagine it. How much more difficulty she'd have keeping her intellect keen if she were never contradicted. At the same time—and this was important—don't just





disagree for the sheer, un-thought-sullied sake of so doing! She would seem to feel a reflex in him kick in, as it kicked her. Then her perceptions would become critical.

Time was, Priscilla had recognized such opposition properly as sex-play, although she called it courtship behavior. She had quite enjoyed it too. David was not the first male about whose person she had swayed almost aimlessly, imitating ballet steps, while he'd denounced her notions on a pier or at a party or underneath an old tree. She'd been taking in the details of the scene, the landscape against which her life was developing. She'd been younger and much given to considering whether to make this moment the one she'd fix in her memory so that forever afterwards one single thought of it would make the whole of her life at this

time come back to her—whether this one would work—whether she should wait. Through the word veils of her reverie she might spot a false dichotomy or two, *Him or me* for instance. She wouldn't even point it out unless she felt an urge to prolong the dialogue in bed. Some men's illogic was endearing.

This had always been a part of their relationship.

Priscilla hung on to her youthful figure without prodigious effort. David expanded or contracted, seasonally, and remained attached to the same ratty bathrobe. Priscilla no longer searched their life for moments to return through. Maybe she was confident that she'd remember. David claimed she never forgot anything. Then, too, maybe she was using up her stores. A roadside scenic overlook where she had stood for a hard haranguing one day in a summer





some years back she could recall down to the whiteness of its Queen Anne's lace. Not David, this other boy might have been right. But across and on into the view, a river, green mountains, blue, her sights had soared and she'd realized that although she loved him very much she didn't need him. Already rejection had twisted his worldview so far around that he claimed to agree with his parents, the Nicaraguans *would* be better dead than red. What I escape, she'd thought.

In terms of self-pity, David managed his own high average measure well. There was another class of man Priscilla could not succeed in tolerating whose self-pity required enormous expenditures of attention on the part of other private individuals. Always these men had at least two women on their string, excluding mothers. *If I can't be free*

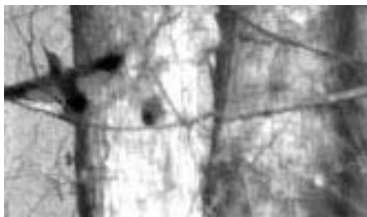


*then I can't stay.* She often wished she had more friends who didn't date musicians.

Or actors. Or bartenders. Or restaurateurs. Or married men.

David didn't cheat. At least Priscilla didn't think so and I saw no way to contradict her although I searched. Priscilla knew that their relationship was a relief for David. Uncertainty didn't quite undo him but he'd hated the way he'd never been able to sleep well between women. This was a fact about David that Priscilla had long and often remarked upon having heard sufficient times yet he continued to mention it when they were meeting new people. At such events she could judge by the form of his emphasis upon the words *psychotic break* the degree of his attraction to his audience as such. Occasionally he'd have a little warble.





Priscilla could begin to wonder what she'd do if David strayed but then a part of her would scream *Just let him try!* like bloody murder and make further consideration of the topic impossible.

Priscilla's sighting of a false dichotomy could provoke her to wonder how many she'd missed. Weeks later might find her still chewing the inside of her lip, seriously, as she tried to recall whether there might not have been whole flocks of them out there. Was she losing her edge or her grip or her God forbid hearing? Poor David whom she knew full well talked ass because it made his mind feel good to be engaged in conversation: Had he or hadn't he actually said that having a third party would let the Republicans take over everything? Who cared! Priscilla herself had resumed voting for Democrats. Was she and if so when had she been

condemned to live where false dichotomies might be as common as sparrows, starlings, robins in spring time? There was no really good answer to this one.

Naturally a dynamic resembling a skit had developed between Priscilla and David to express what happened when she caught him in false dichotomies. They played variations on a theme; this theme: *A-ha!*, she would develop, going first; to be followed by a pause for his improvisations. David's turns with the talking stick had evolved somewhat away from complexity, to put it kindly. Starkly, bleakly: by now he stood but stood it barely. He was a man who didn't want to hear it. Maybe there were just so many ways to engage and he'd run through them all, he said to me. I'm like, *She thinks you're trying to pay with*





*Chinese money, she thinks you're offering trash.* But he'd had it.

When Priscilla tried to worry that her standards were too high the only thing that ever happened was she would hear her grandmother snarl *Not on your life!* and she'd laugh. Her family's claim to being colorful was a just one and that they had always in their fashion led could be believed. That Priscilla would be leading was a fact assumed by all those closest to her person; she herself assumed it. David we suspected of being well on his mild way to rebelling. His manner when he'd told her he assumed she'd meant to say false distinction had almost caused her to strike him: but you must never hit a man so that way you can still say he hit you first and end it cleanly.

Even so, Priscilla had punched David a few times for real and he did complain



about it although not to the police because she never broke the skin.

The couple still found a great deal to talk about after eight whole years. They had shared interests and pets they rather spoiled. To not have to spend all their words upon children as so many people they knew did was an economy Priscilla savored. David had tried to agree. Sadly, he had gone so far as to observe that if everyone abandoned every other topic then there would be no culture. Priscilla should have let this one pass. He'd been supporting her; she still couldn't help herself. Now at her age with *Now or Never* playing in every room it was difficult to know that she had left herself in the way of being badly outnumbered through having put a bayonet hole in her best ally's side. But she was dealing with it. She could sit, her bare legs curled under her, in the big fuzzy new





bathrobe David wouldn't wear and deal with it for hours. Across the canvases of window light upon the walls bird shadows fluttered. How far would Priscilla go to preserve her life's tranquility?

They were at a band shell. Priscilla found herself studying David, again, for signs of patriarchal urges. All around her crawled the evidence that they were common but the fathers all looked much alike to her. They stood about in draperies of empty hammock straps and talked to their guy friends, youthful and proud in chagrin. Some looked exactly like David but with offspring, certainly no happier; Priscilla realized that she could never prove that. Maybe it was true and all about the woman's choice. The women were horrifying her. She and David had recently seen a documentary film about the ivory billed

woodpecker of which he now resumed their discussion. Words were streaming out of him like a flat blue ocean on which in the distance there were sails. Yes, Priscilla saw it coming. *Either a species is extinct or it's not.*

For once she held her peace. She caught sight of a lone survivor through curtains of hanging moss and held it.

*Liz Mackie  
Brooklyn, 5 May 2010*

