

# Excerpt: The Bookseller

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This is not my bedroom.

Where am I? Gasping and pulling unfamiliar bedcovers up to my chin, I strain to collect my senses. But no explanation for my whereabouts comes to mind.

The last thing I remember, it was Wednesday evening and I was painting my bedroom a bright, saturated yellow. Frieda, who had offered to help, was appraising my color choice. “Too much sunniness for a bedroom,” she pronounced, in that Miss Know-It-All tone of hers. “How will you ever sleep in on gloomy days with a room like this?”

I dipped my brush into the paint can, carefully wiped off the excess, and climbed the stepladder. “That’s entirely the point,” I told Frieda. Leaning over, I began cutting along a tall, narrow window frame.

Oughtn’t I to remember what happened next? Oddly, I do not. I cannot recall spending the evening painting, then standing back to admire our work before we cleaned up. I have no memory of thanking Frieda for her help and bidding her good-bye. I don’t remember going to sleep in the sun-colored room, the sharp smell of fresh paint filling my nostrils. But I must have done those things, because here I lie. And given that *here* is not my home, evidently I am still asleep.

Nonetheless, this is not my typical sort of dream. My nighttime forays tend toward the fantastical, toward dreams that place one outside of conventional time and space. This, I have concluded, is because I read so much. Have you read *Something Wicked This Way Comes*? It just hit the stands this past June, but is anticipated to be one of the best-selling books of 1962. Ray Bradbury is splendidly readable; I press the novel on everyone who steps into our bookstore looking for something “really gripping.”

“It will haunt your dreams,” I assure such customers. A self-fulfilling prophecy: the night before last, I dreamed I was stumbling behind Will Halloway and Jim Nightshade, the two young protagonists of Bradbury’s book, as they were enticed by the middle-of-the-night arrival of the carnival in Green Town. I was trying to persuade them to proceed with caution—but they, being thirteen-year-old boys, simply ignored me. I remember how difficult it was to keep up with them, how I could not get my feet to operate correctly. Will and Jim moved farther away in the shadows, their shapes turning into dark dots and then finally to nothing, and all I could do was blubber in frustration.

So you see, I am not the type of woman who dreams about something as straightforward as waking up in another person’s bedroom.

This dream bedroom is quite a bit larger and swankier than my actual bedroom. The walls are sage green, nothing like the deep yellow I chose for home. The furniture is a matched set, sleek and modern. The bedspread is neatly folded at the foot of the bed; soft, coordinating linens encase my body. It’s delightful, in a too-put-together sort of way.

I slide under the covers and shut my eyes. Surely, if I keep my eyes closed, soon I will find myself hunting whales in the South Pacific, dressed rather grubbily and swilling whiskey with the mateys on my ship. Or I’ll be flying high over Las Vegas, the wind blowing my hair back against my face, my arms transformed into enormous wings.

But nothing of the sort happens. Instead, I hear a man’s voice. “Wake up. Katharyn, love, wake up.”

I open my eyes and look into the deepest, bluest eyes I have ever seen.

And then I close my own again.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, which is nude, save for the thin strap of my satin nightgown. It's been a good long while since any man has touched me intimately. But some feelings are unmistakable, no matter how infrequently one experiences them.

I know I should be terrified. That would be the appropriate response, would it not? Even if one is asleep, one should be horrified to sense an unfamiliar man's hand placed on one's bare flesh.

Yet, curiously, I find this imaginary fellow's touch utterly enjoyable. The clasp is gentle but firm, the fingers curled around my upper arm, the thumb gently caressing my skin. I keep my eyes closed, enjoying the sensation.

"Katharyn. Please, love. I'm sorry to wake you, but Missy's forehead feels warm ... she wants you. Please, you need to get up."

Eyes shut, I consider this information. I wonder who Missy is, and why her warm forehead should be any concern of mine.

In that rambling way in which events occur in dreams, my thoughts are replaced with the lyrics to a song that was popular on the radio a few years ago. I can hear the melody, though I'm sure I don't have the words right—Rosemary Clooney sang the tune, and it was something about having stars in one's eyes. Something about not letting love turn one into a fool. The idea makes me smile; clearly, I am being about as foolish here as one could possibly be.

I open my eyes and sit up in bed, instantly remorseful that this position shift causes the blue-eyed man to remove his warm hand from my shoulder.

"Who are you?" I ask him. "Where am I?"

He returns my quizzical look. "Katharyn, are you okay?"

For the record, my name is not Katharyn. It's Kitty.