

DAYS NECROTIC

The night after the funeral he found her crumpled in the shower, cold on full blast, earth and blood clinging to the tiles. Her eyes were closed; she looked like she was trying to be sick, gulping and hacking. Still dressed in the stiff old gown in which they'd buried her, now drenched grey against grey skin. She was shaking. When he said her name she looked at him with white eyes.

"I feel like shit," she said.

Patrick said, "I knew you'd come back."

He carried her downstairs to the big treasure-chest freezer in the garage. There she slept, on top of a wad of blankets, surrounded by the bags of frozen peas and chicken chunks and hanks of fish coated in ice, the dial turned all the way down to blue.

That first night Patrick couldn't sleep. He took a chair and watched her through the frost. She curled on her side, knees to elbows, as in life, hair splayed and stiff with rime, a packet of mixed vegetables hugged to her shoulder like a comforter.

Hours later, he opened up the big lid of the freezer and climbed inside. So cold, so cold. She shuffled aside to make room, encircled him with frozen arms. Never once opening her eyes, slow and sleepy.

"Shut the door, Babe," she said. He did, and they were there in the dark, him and her, twined together, a mass of cold and cooling flesh.

This is death, thought Patrick as he kissed her. This isn't so bad.

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It was a few weeks before they made love again. Patrick had known it would be different. Had even been scared of hurting her. He woke in the middle of the night and she was on the bed beside him, leaning over. Stiff strands of hair sliding against his chest. Cold goddess. Hard flesh kissed against his mouth; she shushed his protest. Dead hands kneading his abdomen.

"Careful," he mumbled. "Careful."

Her flesh was frozen, clay-like. A little malleable, as if the ice began just beneath the skin. The cold was breathtaking. Patrick bit his tongue. She was hard against him, riven, hairs pulling wetly away on his fingers. Syrupy meltwater damping the bed sheets. His body was starting to numb, and beneath the numbness there was a dull and thundering pain. She was smaller than he remembered, infinitely more delicate. She was whispering something. He held the back of her neck and pulled her stiff body against his. Cold so complete it burned.

When he came the pain was like glass. She held him and he, breathless and sobbing, whispered that he loved her, so much.

#

The next morning Patrick found his skin cracked and reddened wherever she had touched; swollen as if something hot and angry were trying to push through from beneath. Tender, too. The pain was exquisite, like a cigarette burn in newgrown flesh: that bitter, that obscenely sensitive. Patrick peeled away the loosened skin and flushed it down the toilet. When he was done he went down to the freezer and looked inside. She was sleeping.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," he said. For breakfast he made pancakes.

#

Mostly she slept, while he was away at work, or asleep himself, or while he ate his quiet meals at a desk table in the garage. Now that she had iced, her time outside the freezer was limited. And of course there was the risk that she would break herself on sharp edges, or that neighbours might pry through the windows. Before the accident Patrick had never thought before about how full of danger the world really was.

She came out at night. Colder then. And darker too; at her insistence Patrick had covered all the mirrors with white plastic, had refrained from touching her stitch-scars. When he woke sometimes in the middle of the night she was lying beside

him. Not asleep: watching. Eyes pale and vacant and shrunken in what little light there was. Those times it was almost like before. He could make-believe, so long as he was careful. So long as he didn't touch her, so long as she didn't speak.

In the morning wet footsteps traced the floor, swimming with scabs. Patrick mopped, and ate his breakfast oatmeal in the garage, and hefted open the big lid of the freezer to kiss her sleepy body before he left for work.

#

She liked the deep-fried apple pies they served at McDonalds. Not straight, of course; the filling would melt her right out. But Patrick would go to the drive-through and order a dozen to freeze for later. Not that she could eat them, either; they'd done something to her at the funeral parlour, something that stopped her insides from working the way they should. But she would chew the frozen pies and then spit and that way she could sometimes taste.

"I'm like one of those cancer lungs," she said. "All rotten on the inside."

"I'm sorry," said Patrick.

"Babe," she said. "I've told you enough times not to say that word."

#

They had their first close call a month after that. He woke one morning to find her asleep beside him, full-on in the sunlight that dusted through the blinds. For a moment nothing

connected; he hadn't seen her in good light for ages: how veined and colourless her skin was, how broken her eyelids, how blood-crusted her scars. For a moment all he felt was a sense of pity and wonder . . . and then when he touched her he found that she was soft.

"Oh, hell," he said. When he lifted her, her body creaked and thin white serum dribbled from the joints of her shoulders. Breath mumbled around her throat; eager grey snot spilled from her mouth and nose and eyes. Pinkish stain of blood on the mattress. He carried her back to the freezer and covered her over with packs of frozen peas. She had come awake and was clutching her fingers. Over and over she was saying, "I feel sick, I feel sick." She smelled like a sweet shop.

Patrick shut the lid. He didn't want to--he wanted to be able to hold her--but it needed to be cold in there. As cold as he could get it. He watched through the lid. She put her hand on the glass and he put his. Could feel her cold through there. If it would only be enough.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He was an idiot. He should have known. Should have been more careful. Her mouth was moving, but Patrick could not hear the sound. He shut his eyes and knelt against the freezer and said her name, a lot.

It was enough, in the end. Just. She froze again. Most of her, at least.

They were careful after that. Even more than they had been before. Patrick bought thick curtains for the windows and turned the boiler off altogether. He started sleeping in the garage too. He would prop the lid of the freezer open with a piece of wood so that, lying on the camp bed beside it, he and she were as close as they reasonably could be. When they made love they did so in the freezer, in the bone-aching chill of it. The ice made his skin break out in sores. He didn't care.

#

For a few days that winter it snowed. Unexpectedly. With violence. Roads slugged and rivers hard. Thick flecks of it falling like a white fog. They watched through the garage windows; the sideways gale mounting slowly on the windowsills, on the lawn outside. She held his hand.

"What if someone sees?" he said.

"Nobody's going to see."

"But what if they do?"

"You worry too much, Babe."

At three in the morning they stepped outside. She in the same frost-coated t-shirt and shorts she always wore, Patrick swaddled in his winter coats. His breath condensing white and bleary. They stood on the back steps for a long time, watching the snow fall.

"Come on," she said. "I want to go to the park."

#

The park was white, caked with snow, looking deathly in the dark. The trees and the lampposts ripe with thick crusts of white. So cold and so quiet that Patrick could hear his own straining heart. Slow snow still falling. In the very centre, there where anyone could have seen them they lay in the slush and peeled away each other's clothes. Hers frost-stiffened to her flesh, Patrick's gummed against his sores. They were kissing, fervently. The lamplight bright enough to see the pallid translucency of her skin, and her scars and her stitches. Where the snow landed on her it did not melt.

"Here," she said. "Touch me." He did. She wriggled back into the snow and Patrick over her. Her hair cracked and came away in thick layers. It repulsed him only for a moment. And then he was inside her, and the pain was unbelievable. You could die from this, he thought. He crushed her against him. She was whispering. She was whispering his name.

Afterwards, they lay together in the snow so long that Patrick's hands went numb and he couldn't even feel the cold.

#

The snow melted, of course. The morning that it was gone she sat staring out of the little window in the garage, a look of carefully-controlled serenity on her face. Patrick held her, tentative.

"Next year," he said. "It'll snow again. It will."

"Sure," she said. "Next year."

#

A night weeks later she climbed out of the freezer and sat straddling him. Something about her was different. Harder than before. Patrick tried to sit up, but couldn't. He stared up at her, half-seen, slick and cold like an animal in the dark.

"Look," she said. She raised up her t-shirt and Patrick saw that her stomach was faintly rounded, her breasts swollen too. The skin looked stretched thin, shiny as a blister. Smooth as the cap of a mushroom. He put his hands on the bump, probing, searching for signs of life he knew he would not find.

"Oh . . ." he said.

"You know what this means?" She was looking down at him, questing.

"I think so," he said.

She stayed that way for a minute, and then smoothed her ice-stiff shirt back down. She bent and kissed him, slowly, torturously, one hand running through his thinning hair.

"This isn't any place to raise a child."

"I know."

"We've got to get away."

"I know."

She kissed him again. "It'll be okay," she said. "One day soon it'll all be okay."

#

They went in the early morning. Everything packed into suitcases and cool bags in the boot of the car. Supplies of

ice and superglue. He lifted her gently out of the freezer. Cold limp swollen arms shrugged around his neck. She was still dozing, half-asleep as he carried her out to the car. It stood in the drive with the windows open, engine idling. He set her in the passenger seat and buckled her belt. She sat slumped. He turned the fan to the snowflake symbol and piled frozen vegetables on her lap.

"You ready?" he said. She didn't reply. "I love you," he said. He got into his side. When he'd backed out to the middle of the street he saw that the neighbour's lights were still on. He stared at the brightened windows, watching for signs of movement. She touched his arm.

"Let's go, Babe." She was grinning, grimly, face in shadow. Her other hand cradled the bump, the precious thing, and Patrick wondered if there would ever be anything more necessary in the world to him, or more in danger. "Long way to go," she said.

He licked his lips, tasting blood from the scabs there. His legs ached. His groin ached. He was shuddering, heavily. For the first time since the funeral he did not know what was going to happen. "Sure," he said.

They pulled out of the street and turned towards the North.

School Report

Sirs,

We think it's important you know we were sneezing when he arrived. All of us sneezing. We'd been left in the gym and George Wakely had started us off, although who started us off isn't really important. It's a habit we formed some time ago and can no longer break: one amongst us - usually Sarah Badshaw or Robin Badwick, both of whose ski-jump noses means their nostrils are more open to the elements - begins to sneeze. Then another one of us will join in, then another, and another, and so on until we're all sneezing. We accept there's probably an element of 'joining in' to all this: none of us need to sneeze. But we simply can't stop ourselves. We've tried, all of us, not to sneeze at one time or another but it just proves physically irresistible. We imagine people like you might call it an 'addiction'.

So, as we say, we were in the thrall of this sneezing when the inspector entered the gym. We've been informed how peculiar it looks and sounds to our neighbours in the town, this orchestra of girlish *atishyoo's*, and more boyish *ayurrrh's* which occasionally springs up, so goodness only knows what visitors make of it. Located at the rear of the school and hidden among branches of long overgrown trees, our gym, as we are sure you are aware, is not a large building - barely bigger than the dining rooms you find in the larger houses - but the stone floor and high ceiling amplify noises, causing them to echo and distort. As we were all crowded into the corner furthest from the door, shielding our project, our sneezing must have made quite a din.

The inspector stood watching us, a bemused half-smile on his face, clearly willing to appear accepting and enthusiastic to whatever was going on. We simply looked back at him, all of us sneezing but none of us smiling or laughing any more. We'd stopped all that as soon as the door-handle was turned. We knew who the inspector was.

It was only when Mr Latimer marched in, pulled the door shut and made his presence known with an authoritative smoothing down of his comb-over that we finally fell silent. Just as we find the urge to sneeze magnetically irresistible once one in our number is seized by it, likewise Mr Latimer's appearance acts like the back-end of a magnet, repelling our instincts, driving away whatever force compels us. Why? We've asked it of ourselves, and even experimented with attempts at sneezing or similarly frivolous behaviour in his company, all to no avail. It's a simple science: we behave in his presence. He's our only teacher and, apart from our own parents, the only adult we see every day. I suppose the sad truth is this: we love Mr Latimer.

We could tell they'd already had a disagreement. 'Children,' Mr Latimer said, 'this is Mr Sally. Who can tell me why he's here today?'

As naturally as she could, Rose Wakeshaw put her hand up.

'Yes,' said Mr Latimer, picking her out as though the rest of us had our hands up, 'Rose.'

'He's here to inspect us,' said Rose, then sank back into the crowd.

At this the inspector smiled. He had a warm smile, genuine and unsuspecting. Mr Latimer smiled back at him. We couldn't bring ourselves to smile. Later, we agreed that a pulse of tension had passed through us at this point.

'Very good, Rose,' said the inspector. He was friendly. He looked a great deal more earnest than any of us had expected him to look. Although Mr Latimer hadn't exactly described what the inspector would look or sound like, from the things he had told us - about the city and the people who lived there - we'd created a cumulative picture in our minds. We'd expected someone who would glare down at us with contempt and superiority, marking his clipboard as he interrogated us. But this man had no clipboard. His high forehead was lined with folds, as though caring about education had left him creased. He wore a matching crumpled brown suit and a tie patterned with cartoon pictures of rackets and tennis balls. None of us had expected an inspector who dressed in a hurry in the mornings but enjoyed sports.

'Very good indeed,' he said. 'But not *quite* right, I'm afraid. I'm not here to inspect you. That would be the job of a nurse or a doctor. I'm here to inspect your school, to make sure it's all working fine. So, I suppose you could say I'm a doctor for your school.'

Mr Latimer laughed at this, raising his eyebrows to signal for us to join in. We hadn't been told there would be jokes.

'Yes, well, all I need you to do is whatever you'd ordinarily be doing on a wet Tuesday afternoon like today. That alright?'

Again, we gave him only silence and stares. It may seem odd to you that Mr Latimer should have neglected to give us anything further to say to the inspector so we didn't come across as unusual. But you can't predict what direction conversations will take, even prescribed ones such as this and, should he have had the opportunity to file his report, he would no doubt have chalked up our non-communicativeness to an anxiousness at being monitored or a rural wariness of outsiders. At any rate, his opinion of us is unimportant.

'Right, jolly good. Well, I suppose, seeing as you're all here, that would be PE, yes?'

'Quite right,' said Mr Latimer, and gave us all a nod. We began, most of us, to play between ourselves. Amongst us was a sack containing sports items and, just hidden from view, four spools of thick copper wire. We pulled from it a racket and a beanbag and began an improvised rounders-style game. The inspector watched us, his brow puckered with what looked like concern, a hand to his mouth. Several

of us maintained our position around our project. It wasn't easy to miss - roughly the size of a human body, a dirty white sheet draped over its misshapen outline - but if the inspector saw it he gave no outward indication.

The inspector and Mr Latimer began to speak. As we played we listened, those of us able to hear the conversation going on.

The inspector, still frowning but letting his hand drop from his face: '...the rest of the children...?'

Mr Latimer, smiling, replying: '... no more, sir - these you see here are the...'

The inspector, confused: '... but all different age groups...'

Mr Latimer, still smiling but also glaring, his reasonable tone shaped now with enmity: '... can't be expected to divide so few into...'

The inspector, shifting his hands down to his hips: '... aware that the practice is unlawful...'

Mr Latimer, his head tilted as though to display concern, but really to get the inspector's full attention, scooping any stray concentration the inspector might not be giving: '... the full backing of my community...'

The inspector: '... becomes the authorities' concern...?'

Mr Latimer: '... about your bloody authorities...'

A silence then. We hadn't expected things to escalate so quickly. The inspector returned to watching us play at playing: Thomas Wickshaw gently pitched the beanbag underarm towards Henrietta Wakefield who struck it weakly with the badminton racket. Grace Massie caught it and stooped to touch it to the ground. 'Baggsy!' we all called.

Needless to say, we rarely have visitors. Unfamiliar cars sometimes pass through the town and, occasionally, they stop to ask someone for directions. Every once in a while the passengers even get out, looking for a pub to get a bite to eat. We can always tell when these interlopers are loose about the place, even when we're at school where we can't see them and there's no-one to inform us of them. We just know. It's like our sneezing, some kind of tic in the nervous system we share with this place: as soon as they are out of their cars and wandering about looking at things, it flares up like a stench in our thoughts. It becomes impossible not to start seeing our surroundings through their eyes, thinking what they think. Our church, the town's oldest building, is ordinarily like a kind of grandfather-place to everyone who lives here, anchored to the land, its roots reaching deep into our history. It's a place we love, if love is the word, without knowing it. But in the eyes of these intruders it becomes a bent stone shack, squat and sunken with age, almost claimed by damp and spreading moss. The rear of our post-office, following a big storm which occurred before any of us were born, has a wooden wall which, although initially temporary, has proved so sturdy no-one's

bothered to replace it. Ordinarily, we'd think of it - if we think of it at all - as a small symbol of our town's ingenuity and resourcefulness. With our visitors' thoughts it becomes a ramshackle patchwork of discarded planks held together with fraying twine. And the row of large houses by the marsh-lands - usually these are the envy of the community, protected as they are by a sloping, mulchy woods at the outskirts of the town. On days like today, however, they become simply a clump of idiot hovels knuckled into a dirty landscape's wet patch. These thoughts are embarrassing, and it's difficult not to resent the people who put them in our heads.

The inspector was having these thoughts. We could hear them. In fact, you could even see it on his face. He was very good at appearing to be sincere, but no-one is ever wholly sincere. Every turn of his head, every gesture, every movement of his eyes as they alighted on some new element in his unfamiliar surroundings - they all belied his discomfort and distain. Please don't misunderstand us. He was polite and courteous, very much so. We didn't want to resent him. But through the layers of friendliness and tolerance, each of us could hear the same old screaming nucleus of ridicule. Never a pleasant thing to be on the receiving end of.

'What game is this?' asked the inspector. He'd approached close enough to break our circle.

'I believe it's called baggsy,' said Mr Latimer, still standing at the other end of the room.

'Please, I'd like the children to answer,' said the inspector, not turning round. He crouched down to face us, his eyes moving from one of us to the other. He still seemed not to see our project although we were grouped around it, some of us shifting very slightly to try to block it from his view with our shoulders. We didn't look at it. We just stared at the inspector.

'And what are the rules for this *baggsy*?' he said.

We didn't speak.

Slowly, Mr Latimer approached the inspector, surveying those of us he could see over the top of his head.

'I wonder if any of you can tell me,' the inspector was saying, 'the name of the country we're currently at war with?'

We stared at him.

'The name of the country? No...? Alright. Do you know... who the Prime Minister is...? Any of you...? Any of you older children...?'

Behind him, Mr Latimer removed his tweed jacket.

'What is the capital of this country? Anybody...?'

We said nothing. Mr Latimer removed his fob-watch, slipped it into his pocket and then rolled back his sleeves.

'What is the *name* of this country?'

The inspector sighed. He picked out Susan. Susan is visibly the oldest by some years. 'You... How old are you?' he asked, his eyes moved up and down her body mistrustfully.

At this Mr Latimer gave us a nod, his arms outstretched to conduct us. His eyes were wide and alive.

'Can you at least tell me... *wha...?*' He broke of, smiling for a moment, confused, a quick breath of laughter escaping him. Several of us had lunged forward, clamping onto either shin. 'What's going on? What're you...?' His smile disappeared as others leapt at him, grabbing his arms, pulling him forward. We were hoping our suddenness would surprise him and he'd topple forward, allowing us to hold him down. But he was quicker to resist than we'd thought and immediately began to shake himself free, violently swinging some of us from his arms, kicking others from his legs. Several of us who should have assisted the rest of the class at this point found that, despite the preparation we'd received, we were too stunned by what was now going on and merely stood watching, idle and open-mouthed. We managed to hold the inspector in place however and, as planned, Mr Latimer pounced at him from behind and clamped an arm around his neck, crumpling the inspector's tie and a lapel up against the side of his face.

'Please!' the inspector was shouting, aware he'd been defeated. His eyes fastened in our direction, searching our faces for some kind of explanation. We stared at him. For a moment his gaze rested on the project. There was no point in concealing it now.

Mr Latimer pinned the inspector's hands back and barked at us. Just a short bark, no words. We knew what he meant. One of the older boys among us - none of us can remember who - stepped forward and dealt a blow to the stomach of the inspector. He lurched forward with a long painful-sounding wheeze, his struggling ceased. Mr Latimer lifted a foot and stamped hard against the back of the inspector's knees. The inspector gave a weak cry and slumped forward, the side of his face connecting heavily with the stone floor. We saw a tooth skid out of his mouth and down the front of his shirt, a pool of blood already creeping across his collar.

Mr Latimer straddled his shoulders, grunting as he shifted about, ensuring he had enough purchase on the inspector to keep him down, working a hand into the man's hair. He gave a nod and those of us assigned to pull the spools of copper wire from the bag did so and came forward to bind together the inspector's hands.

'Stop this!' A belated, convulsing fury appeared to have suddenly seized the inspector. 'Get them off me! Get them off me! Get them off me!'

Having secured a firm grip in the inspector's hair, Mr Latimer yanked his head up. We saw the side of the inspector's face was now

marked with a large arrow-shaped cut roughly pointing towards his eye, blood pooling into his lower eyelid then leaking down to his neck and onto the floor. His brief burst of indignation instantly spluttered into a hoarse, pleading wheeze. Those of us who had come forward now began binding his feet together. Then we tethered them to his hands so that he was on his front, his limbs all bunched together and pointing upwards behind him.

'Please let me go! Please!'

'That sheet,' Mr Latimer shouted at us, raising himself away from the wheezing, trussed-up body, 'get it away!' There were flecks of spittle in his moustache, his face red.

We lifted the sheet away from our project.

When we were building it - the whole thing assembled weeks ago in strict accordance with Mr Latimer's instructions, of course - we all agreed that, even though you can't tell just by looking at it what it's for, it's obvious that the purpose of this contraption is to hold a person's body and do something to it. It's all hinges and spokes and wooden grating and large leather-padded handles, but there's something decipherable about it, something uncomfortably human. The inspector's reaction - a series of short, breathless groans as he tried to writhe about face and squirm back towards the door - confirmed as much. Something which had caused us particular intrigue were two rounded grooves which we'd cut into the lengths of wood that, when the device was operated and they met, formed a hole where the neck of whoever was inside would evidently be placed, allowing their head to stick out the side. But, we had all agreed during its construction, a neck could not possibly fit.

'I'll have the children write a report detailing exactly what happens to you,' said Mr Latimer, lifting a casual boot into the inspector's face.

After we'd killed him, Mr Latimer had us gather up the inspector's compacted body in the white sheet. We lugged it through the school garden's back gate, through a gap in the chicken-wire perimeter fence and through to a rocky clearing in the surrounding woodland. There we came to the large hole in the ground, exactly as we'd left it the day before, our spades sticking out of the large mound of soil alongside it.

We dragged the inspector's body into the hole, the sheet coming away somewhat as it landed, revealing a mess of bone protruding from a squashed-up knot of bent toes, something red and stringy and dirty sprawling from the flesh like roots. We quickly took turns shoveling the soil back into the hole. When we had finished one of us poked a stick into the earth as a marker.

Mr Latimer hurried us back to the school to wash our hands and listen to a special lesson about what we'd achieved. On our return we were directed past a grassy hummock of earth, the grave of a previous visitor whose behavior had necessitated a similar sentence, a school story we are all familiar with. Something Mr Latimer didn't notice was a shard of slate wedged into the mound which is there still. None of us know who placed it there but we assume it must be one of us. Weather had faded what's written on it to a few chalk scratches, but we all know what it says: 'I shall return. Have faith'.

Word count: 2,650 words

The Doppelgangers

The longest we lived in one place was seven months.

My parents suffered from wanderlust. I didn't know there was a term for their condition until I was ten and I found the word in a dictionary. It kind of made sense that they'd be under the thrall of some weird German and hard to pronounce disease, seeing as my dad was an intellectual snob and suffering from run-of-the-mill idiocy would be a bit too ignoble to bear.

Later on I met the doppelgangers and that explained even more. Or maybe it didn't. Who knows.

#

It started with the Mexican debt crisis of 1982. One day we had a house and one day we didn't. Oddly enough I don't think my parents minded that much. Something in them had been itching to roll out maps, set forth and conquer new territory.

We packed the cactus, the books and a couple of suitcases and headed away.

For the first few years it was fun. We went down to the coast and I got to start a seashell collection. My mother braided my hair as we rode the car and the radio blared the songs they liked and my parents sang to them. Then we moved further south and it was warmer and we lazily slipped into the Yucatan peninsula. But by the time we were heading out of Veracruz I was fed up with the constant shuffle.

The apartments we took were bare of almost any furniture because we wouldn't be there long enough to accumulate possessions. We didn't even unpack much of our stuff anymore. And though they said it would be different this time around, this time we'd settle and plant some roots, that it would all be better soon, I knew my parents were liars.

I didn't even have the cactus – it had rotted away from overwatering.

I think it might have been my anger which brought the doppelgangers but I can't really say. They were there one day, like mushrooms sprouting after the rain and boy, was that a rainy September. Mexico City should have been exciting but with my soggy socks and the second-hand uniform I had to wear to school, all the excitement died away.

It was a private school. Catholic. But my aunt insisted on it and she was, after all, paying for my education, though her generosity did not extend to a new uniform.

Things had gone worse than expected in Jalapa. Short of cash, my parents turned to my dad's sister for assistance. Aunt Carolina had money to spare, but would not part with it without making some explicit demands. That included a proper Catholic school for me.

My dad was a journalist and a bibliophile. My mother a photographer. I still have some of her photographs from back then. Black and white images which show the long, empty stretches of highway, the changing Mexican landscape.

My dad went to work for a small printer of school books. My mother went to work part-time as a cashier.

My mother was supposed to pick me up after school, but she was often tardy. She had an innate inability to tell time and seemed to function on an entirely different schedule than the rest of the world. Active at three a.m., out of bed by noon. This had not been much of an issue before, but now, with my

dad employed full-time and my mother with her part-time job – they had been freelancers before – she had to pick me up and she was late.

The nuns at school, who had the gentle touch of scorpions, glared at her, white teeth bared, whenever she appeared, heels clicking.

It didn't matter how much I begged her to be on time, she never listened.

One afternoon, as I waited after school long after the rest of my classmates, I saw my mother and father across the street. They were holding a large umbrella. I thought it was odd that they'd both come for me.

A few minutes later my mother arrived. She was all wet. She didn't have an umbrella and was cursing – she cursed often and loudly – about her employer, that bitch who snapped her fingers at her.

I asked her what had happened to her umbrella and she said she'd lost it two days ago.

We got into the beat up car that was a source of shame to me. Everyone else had a fancier vehicle. I pressed my face against the window and looked out at the shiny, new cars going by and I wished we could go to Acapulco. We never vacationed. There was no money for such frivolities and, anyway my father liked to remind us, Acapulco was for the bourgeois.

#

We lived in aunt Carolina's house, a large, old structure wallpapered in different shades of yellow. It was a very dignified home. Aunt Carolina echoed it in her prim dresses with flower patterns and her sensible shoes. My mother, who'd fallen in love in university and subsequently dropped out and married my father, seemed to be removed an entire generation from Carolina even though they were close in age.

My mother was pretty and bubbly. She liked to dress in tight jeans and tighter shirts, take photographs, and spend plenty of time going out at nights. My aunt did not approve of this, especially the going out at night because my father had a job to attend to and they couldn't very well take off as they did before, could they?

My father agreed and nodded and said his sister was a smart woman, but he still found way too many excuses to drink and when aunt Carolina wasn't looking he'd slip into his favourite leather jacket and trot off to read at the park or play pool and smoke cigarettes. Talking about Camus never made anyone a single peso, and the result was any extra money we had went towards books, drinks and smokes.

My father took me with him to the pool hall sometimes. I was only a kid, but there were plenty of youths there anyway and nobody enforced the sign that said "minors will not be allowed in the premises."

He liked to talk philosophy and literature while he played with Seferino, a high school teacher with a high-pitched voice, and Tomas, a translator of French novels.

I'd listen to them, never understanding a word, and drank lots of lime sodas until it was time to go back to the house. Other kids at my school could say their dad had taken them horseback riding or bought them a new toy during the weekend, but all I could claim was a couple of lime sodas and his back turned to me while he shot an eight ball.

One evening when we were heading home – my father was talking about the book he'd read the day before, his words slightly slurred – I caught sight of a man who looked exactly like him walking on the opposite side of the street. The man was wearing a very nice suit and shiny shoes and his hair was slicked back, cut short instead of tied in a ponytail. He carried a briefcase.

I tugged at my father's arm, trying to make him look, but he didn't and then the man turned the corner.

My dad laughed with his deep, vibrant voice and he said he had a few pesos and we could stop to buy a hot plantain from the street seller pushing his little cart.

#

They had a *kermesse* at school and all the mothers made treats, cooked tamales and prepared orchata water. Not my mother. She could mix all the right chemicals to develop negatives but she couldn't – or wouldn't – produce a platter of tostadas. The result was that I was the only kid at school that didn't bring any food. To top it off my mother had braided my hair and I didn't like it anymore because the other kids said I looked like an Indian, like the maid's kid.

I stared at the colourful stands with their signs made on pieces of cardboard and their paper flowers. I stared at the mothers behind the stands and their children.

I saw my mother's double by a food stand wearing a conservative beige blouse and small earrings, very much unlike my real mother with her tight shirts, the loud laughter, the cheap jewellery she liked to wear, the camera resting on her hip.

The double stared at me.

#

My mother worked in a shop in the Zona Rosa – formerly an area of upscale boutiques, most its cache now lost – which was the worst possible location for a woman of her temperament, specially due to the strategic positioning of a camera store with all sorts of fancy filters, tripods and lenses.

One afternoon, when we stopped by to pick her pay check, she ended up spending almost the whole of it on some camera equipment that took her fancy. When we stepped out I saw a copy of my mother ride off in a taxi, her long hair cut short, and sporting some pearls I'd never seen her wear.

That night my mother and father had a row over the camera equipment.

It was like this with them frequently. They'd yell, insult, even come to blows – if this was the case, I had to stop them – and then quickly make up in a couple of days.

I hated it and I hated them.

I pressed a pillow over my head until I heard a door slam shut. After a little while I stepped towards the window, staring at the moon and wondering if all the other kids had to deal with clowns like these.

Then I looked down onto the street and saw a man and a woman staring up at me. I placed my hand against the glass, as if greeting them, but then grew afraid and returned to bed.

#

The bitter rain continued to fall, clogging sewers and causing floods, threatening to return Mexico City to the swamp from which it had risen.

The nuns' lessons were stale and my mind wandered when they spoke. Because it rained so much we couldn't have recess in the little courtyard. We ate our lunch at our desks and were supposed to read quietly instead of playing games.

I read a thick dictionary. I loved learning the meaning of words. That's how I had come upon wanderlust and many other interesting definitions. My father, himself a lover of words, gave me a piece of bubble gum for every difficult word I acquired.

That day, as the rain sang its litany, I found a new word. It was chance. My hands opening the dictionary to a random page, a finger falling upon the letters. Doppelgänger. An evil double. An alter ego.

I looked across the street that afternoon – my mother was late, again – and saw a man and a woman with my parents' faces. They nodded at me. I nodded in return.

#

Aunt Carolina had dinner parties twice a month. She ordered tiny little breads and salty crackers from the nearby bakery, and cousins and friends I had never met descended upon the house. They men all wore suits and ties and were all *licenciado* something, all slightly pudgy and greyed, unlike my father, who stood quiet, thin and swathed in his leather jacket.

The women wore dresses similar to my aunt's, sensible shoes and painted smiles. None of them understood my mother's interest in installing a dark room in the house – we'd always had one before – nor her open laughter.

These people's children were chubby, unruly, regular kids who got to go to Acapulco. We were too good for Acapulco, for these reunions, for the whole freaking world.

The parties left my parents looking slightly frayed. They fought after them. Late at night my mother accused my father of having dragged her to Mexico City, of living like beggars. He accused her of ingratitude, of spending too much money and wearing flashy clothes and flirting loudly with everyone they bumped into.

After one memorable fight my mother took the car, threatening to drive off and never come back, succeeding only in crashing the old thing.

In the morning my mother was tight-lipped. We boarded the bus. All the windows were misty and you couldn't see outside. The bus was packed with people in their suits, carrying briefcases, looking straight ahead.

My mother found us a seat and we spent the ride in silence. I rubbed away the mist veiling the outside with the palm of my hand, but all I saw was greyness and rain.

#

My father lost his job at the beginning of December.

This made aunt Carolina angry and my mother even angrier. She had been planning to quit her own job and try to some freelancing again. My father's sudden unemployment meant she'd have to stay.

My father said if she wanted to split she could do it and she said she wouldn't leave me with him, an irresponsible drunkard who couldn't even ride the subway three stops up the street and push paper clips around a desk.

My father countered with my mother's lack of punctuality and her unnecessary displays of bare flesh, as though she were still sixteen when she had passed thirty.

Banging of doors, drawers empty, suitcases filled with clothes and then emptied as the inevitable making up took place.

But unlike other times it felt like they had reached a boiling point and there were fights every third day and with the posadas in full swing my father was drinking more, my mother was screaming louder and I was learning more words than I had ever learned before, just trying to bury my head in the dictionary or melt into the wallpaper.

On December 23 they came to blows. My mother flung a vase towards my father. It hit him smack in the face. He responded by rolling up a newspaper and hitting her on the back.

“Will you stop!” I yelled, which was what I usually yelled.

And they did, looking contrite.

And then, after they had cooled down, my mother came looking for me and said “Sweetheart, it’ll all be better soon” and she asked if I wanted my hair braided.

Only it was never better. That’s what they promised as we skipped from town to town, as we drove down the highway with the windows rolled down, as the years melted.

It’ll be better soon. My parents were liars of the worst sort.

I lay with my hands pressed against my belly, feeling a knot in my gut. Everything was quiet. I listened to my own breathing.

Without turning on the lights I tiptoed to the front of the house and opened the door.

The doubles were waiting patiently, sitting on the steps. They walked in and went up the stairs, towards my parent’s room. I went back to bed.

#

Three weeks later my mother sold all her photo equipment and asked for a full-time position at the shop. My father, sobered up, with his hair cut and in a suit, looked much more respectable and landed a job at a paper factory writing neat productivity reports.

They didn’t smile, but they didn’t fight either.

In July they bought a new car. We decided to drive it to Acapulco for the weekend.

As my father was swinging the suitcase inside I chanced to look behind and saw a man and a woman by the curb, looking very much like my parents. He wore a leather jacket, she had a camera strapped around her neck.

They raised their heads, as if to signal me.

I looked away.

THE END

THE SWIMMER IN THE DESERT

He always wakes just before the alarm. Lifting the gauze of his mosquito net, he nudges the fan, directing the beam of air across his chest and face. It's luxury time, those ten minutes on his bunk in the dark. The only noise is the soft white hum of the fan. He lies with his hands behind his head and imagines himself back home. Sunday tea-time snoozy from too much lunch, his mum stroking his hair with thin, indifferent fingers as he reads. Always a shock the shriek of the alarm. Someone curses him in a sleep-rusty voice. He turns off the alarm, swings his legs over the edge of the bunk, and fumbles in the darkness for his clothes.

There'd been a sandstorm the day before. A great swelling blindness of dust that blew down from the hills and covered everything. He'd panicked for a moment as the sand swept over them and he plunged his face to the ground and breathed in the hollow of his cupped hands. He'd felt as if his mouth were full of bandages, as if he were sucking air through a mouthful of swabs. When the storm abated they'd looked like ghosts. Ten of them rising to their knees like zombies shaking off grave dust. Now sand still pours from the pockets of his trousers, the cuffs of his jacket.

He rises to his feet and steps out of the fan's cool stream into an ugly fug of hot, damp air. Even at 3 a.m. it's stifling inside the tent. The week before someone had stolen his fan and he'd half-slept in a froth of sweat. Only after he'd gone to the Chief was the fan returned. He feels under the bunk for his boots. He'd put them there last night after emptying them of sand and cleaning them. He was the first in bed as he'd wanted to read. His mum has sent him a torch that

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clips onto the covers of his books, casting a blue-white shard of light onto the pages. He read for an hour before sleeping. He has trained himself not to hear the others when they come into the tent from the mess. He uses the torch now to look for the boots. The area around his bunk is uncluttered, just a few orderly piles of books and clothes. The boots aren't there. He looks at his watch, swears quietly, and straps on his belt. He walks barefoot through the tent and out into the courtyard.

It's still very dark. There's no moon and the stars are faint in the sky, an impression of stars, hardly there. He'd thought, before getting here, that it would be cold at night. But it is never cold in the desert. Even the night air feels as if it has been breathed a million times, as if some desert djinn is panting stale air straight into his lungs. A cat scuttles across the courtyard and into the mouth of a tunnel. Moments later, another cat follows, hissing. He walks into the ammo shed, a low, grey building on one side of the courtyard. He switches on the light, opens his locker and picks up his pistol and two rounds of bullets. A pair of binoculars on a strap around his neck. Out again, hurrying now.

He's in the main compound tunnel. Fine rock underneath his bare feet, breezeblocks supporting the sides. There are no roofs here, although in some places a rough hatch of branches and palm fronds stretches overhead. The main risk is grenades thrown over the compound walls. The tunnels had been built when there was still the threat of mortar fire from the hills. To be half-buried like this gives the impression of safety, he thinks. But there's no safety here. He comes to the foot of the watchtower above the main compound gates.

- You're late, private. An angry whisper from above.

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He shrugs and waits for the lieutenant to climb down.

- Nothing. Couple of black hawks over at midnight but bugger all else.

He nods at the lieutenant and then climbs up the ladder, his toes curling around the metal rungs. At the top is a small chair, a .50 caliber machine gun on a swivel turret, a radio linked to the compound's ops room. He sits and waits for dawn.

He'd been reading a short story the night before about a man who goes swimming. He'd liked how the man in the story had a "cartographer's eye." That seemed real to him. He often looks out at the landscape through his binoculars and imagines it on a map: contour lines lazily waving or rushing thickly together, the secret messages within the course of a river, the cool relief of mountain lakes. He mainly reads short stories because they seem more like life – or his life at least – than novels. He is three months into a six-month tour at Checkpoint Salaang. He spits over the side of the tower and pats the handle of the revolver in his belt.

An hour later the first silver line of dawn traces the outline of the mountains and he realises he can hear water. He has heard it before in the stillness of the morning, but never this clearly. The snows are melting in the high Kush, sending emissary streams needling down the slopes, feeding the wadis of the plateau, the poppy fields that glow red in the foothills. As the air around lightens, he can make out the stream in the distance.

He'd passed the dry bed a few days earlier. He was with the Multiple on foot patrol – eight hours with guns and ammo and water, climbing into the

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nearest hills, always walking with one foot tapping the ground ahead like a blind man's cane. They'd found an IED on the main Lashkar Gah road. A basic device buried under a mound of blue-grey aggregate. Later, he'd stood for a while in the centre of a poppy field, the heads of the flowers nodding lazily in a soft warm breeze. He picked one of the flowers and tore the petals off, like tearing the wings from an insect. He'd thought how strange it was that this flower had meant something so different to him when he was young. Church, old people, poems. Now it would always be this: the fierce heat of the sun.

On the way back they'd crossed the riverbed through which now tumbles a stream of babbling dark water. He leans out over the side of the watchtower as if drawn by the noise of the stream. The sun begins to rise, and not with the pink diffidence of the sun at home, but already white and cruel as it explodes over the peaks of the Kush. The coming of the light changes the sound of the water. There is something urgent now. His throat is dry and he reaches down to his belt for his flask to find it too is missing.

He doesn't know who has been taking his things. It has become part of his life here. Part of a more general deprivation. He barely notices. He licks his dry lips and sighs. He came here because he thought it would make something of him; in fact it is unmaking him. The road leading up to the gate of the compound is lined with Hesco barriers. They look fragile, almost transparent. He imagines them as Chinese lanterns, imagines lighting them and seeing them float up into the pale sky. He looks at his watch: an hour to go.

He lifts his binoculars and follows the course of the stream. A mile to the east it passes under the lip of a rocky levee and fans out into a pool. It looks cool

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there in the shadows cast by the rocks. Silver flowers open and close on the sandstone lip that juts above the water as the sun catches the stream. He hasn't swum since he's been here. Still throwing his eyes down the black cylinders towards the stream, he remembers swimming with Marie.

They had skipped school one Wednesday in May and cycled out to Cochno Loch. Marie's dad was a teacher at the university and they lived in a posh house near the botanic gardens. He said he'd pick her up even though it was out of his way because he didn't want her to see where he lived. They'd cycled up Maryhill Road. He remembered the way her tongue stuck from the corner of her mouth as she pedaled. Her hair flew out behind her like smoke from the chimney of her head. They rushed past Dawsholme Park, over the canal, and then they were in the countryside.

They pushed their bikes up the steepest part of the hill and then stood on the crest looking down. Two lochs – Jaw and Cochno – separated by a narrow isthmus. The water danced in the early summer sunlight. They got back on their bikes and flung themselves down the rutted dirt road. Swooping and soaring down the hillside they came, through a grove of pines and across the carpark and then skidding to a halt beside the water and the momentum of their descent carried them out of their clothes and into their swimming costumes and then the sharp embrace of the water where they swam urgently, joyously, out to the centre of the loch.

They'd met at a Belle and Sebastian gig. – It's *Marie*, alright, like *starry*. I'm not fuckin' French, she'd yelled in his ear as he passed her a pint of cider in a flimsy plastic cup. And after their swim, when they dried off on the banks of the

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loch, she'd looked around with quick, narrow eyes and unfastened her bikini top, letting the sun and his gaze fall upon her as she stretched out on the tufty grass. When he kissed her it felt like they were swimming again, nervelessly, over deep water.

It is time for his relief. The sun is higher now, near-unlookable. He hears the reveille – a short, brutal blast over loudspeakers, and the clatter of breakfast being prepared in the mess. Someone is singing in the shower block. He feels a moment's happiness, knowing that one day he'll be in a position to look back on this, that, minute by minute, the future is becoming the past. He'll forget the heat and the fear and acronyms – the FOBs and the IEDs and the CCPs. He'll call Marie. She has gone to university down south somewhere. No, better than that, he'll get on a train and turn up with flowers and kiss her and tell her about it. Tell her in a way that will make it real for her. He smiles and feels his lips crack.

The sun detonates above him, pulverizing him with its heat, blazing into the space behind his eyes. His head is a molten orb on his shoulders. He's aware of every patch of exposed skin. His relief is late. He tries to force his mind back to the image of Marie swimming in the loch, but it is too distant, too cool a picture. He looks over towards the pool of water and sees that it is still in shadows. He feels an urgent need to swim. In the short story he read the night before, the main character is scornful of men who don't throw themselves violently into pools. He imagines standing on the lip of the levee and hurling himself into the water.

An hour passes. He is sitting in the narrow band of shade on the floor of the watchtower, no longer even pretending to keep watch. Every so often he

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rises and scans the maze of tunnels for sign of his relief. He knows that they want him to leave his post. That some shameful plan was hatched over beers in the mess the night before, the snaking path of its plot ending in his humiliation. He feels himself pitching as if on a boat. He rises again, but this time, binoculars to his eyes, he looks at the pool.

He hasn't swum since the trip to the loch with Marie. More than anything now, he wants to feel water on his body. An urge that grips him physically. Given a choice between drinking water and swimming water, he'd choose the latter. He sucks his lower lip and finds that it's bleeding. He knows about the water gardens in this part of the world, the wide avenues of whispering trees and babbling fountains. There is a religion of water here. He can understand that. He can see that God is dancing in the water under the levee.

Dejectedly, he climbs down from the watchtower. His joints creak, his binoculars slap against his neck, his sweat spirals to the ground as he descends the ladder. He pauses at the compound gates. With a sudden instinct, moving in the free space before solid thought can form, he reaches out and opens the door that is set into the right-hand gate. It opens with a groan. Still walking fluidly, in a trance, he steps through the door and out into the world.

He sets off at a brisk pace across the burning, fulvous earth. His feet are scorched by the heat, torn by the sharp spines of scrub, cut on rocks. He doesn't even think about IEDs. He begins to run. He takes off his jacket and lets it drop to the ground behind him, peels off the white t-shirt to reveal his bone-thin body. He draws in a deep breath of air and lets it out with a low, delighted whoop. In the mountains above he catches a momentary flash of sun on glass, ignores it,

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and presses onwards. He is sprinting now, leaping rocks and brush, full of mad and childish delight.

When he comes to the levee he looks back to the compound and can see that the watchtower is still empty. He undoes his belt, pulls down his trousers, his boxer shorts, is suddenly pleased by the burn of the sun on his body. He edges to the lip of the levee and stands there, like an angel perched on the rim of a cloud. There is a crack, and it is the sound of a body plunging into water, the sound of thunder, the sound of a rifle shot in hill country.

He plunges downwards into cool water that retains the memory of snow. Water that wound between grazing goats, through poppy fields, beside the small house where two of the young men live who now stand above the stream, looking into its shadowy depths. The water carries in it iron, zinc, silica, traces of goat and human faeces, the spit of a grandmother from Chitral, opium and poppy stems, the petals of flowers from a wedding at Kachil, potassium, magnesium, gunpowder, human and dog urine, the sweat of a man who bathed that morning at dawn in Tang e-Gharu. Despite the weight of all that it carries, the water bounds along the stream bed, dancing and tear-clear. The young men shoot their guns into the pool for effect and then scamper back to the truck parked at the foot of the levee.

Already the force of the current has carried his body onwards, over jagged shallows where the water roils white, into another, deeper pool, where swimming creatures are congregating, insect larvae thrusting themselves from the sandy bed into green depths. His foot snags on a root and he is caught, trembling, in the stream, his eyes wide and bright under the water. A plume of

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blood escapes like the ghost of a watersnake from the hole in his head, is caught by the current, and carried away.

THE CUCKOO.

We spot her first, lying in the water which we know went cold hours ago.

He's not home yet. He's still at work, going through his usual routine of coffee breaks and paperwork. He's a good boy, we know that. When Mummy and Daddy said; *try hard at school and you'll go to University*. He did. When Mummy and Daddy said; *try hard at University and you'll get a good job*. He did. When he got a good job, he peaked. Mummy and Daddy had no more advice for him. *You're an adult*, they said, *you make your own decisions now*. It's fine. Life. It really is. He has a car and a house and a sky plus television box.

She doesn't move. She writhes. And we can see instantly that there is something unnatural about her. The water has an oily quality that clings to her skin each time her lungs push against their cage and break the water's membrane. Her breathing has an irregular pattern, unsustainable by any healthy human being. We see her in a dim candlelight, although we cannot see the light source. Her arm is resting at an awkward angle over the side of the bath and water slides down a finger extended. A stalactite. She could have been there longer. Occasionally, she twists, as one in fire or in lime.

He twists. A key in the lock. A small sounds which erupts in a long stagnating silence.

She moves at the sound of his return. Our vision is split between him, at the door of his home, and her, in his bath tub. The door creaks and we're reminded of an old scary film. He stops this happening again via a quick detour to the car for some WD40. He's mildly glad to be home. He leaves his coat on the bottom of the stairs and drops the plastic Tesco bag onto the kitchen floor. He drinks semi skimmed milk from the bottle. We're waiting for him to go to the bathroom, but he doesn't. He sits with the milk bottle in front of the television for what may be a few hours. We can't tell. A programme about cars and a news programme flash by us. He watches a comedy show and does not laugh.

All this time, she lies there.

One bottle of semi-skimmed milk, three cups of tea and one beer later, his bladder finally starts to feel flooded. By the time he gets upstairs, he's already unbuttoned and has pulled his fly down. His hand is in his pants and he's facing the toilet by the time he registers the fact that a tall woman is in his half-filled bath tub. He lets a steam of profanities bounce against the walls, while she lies very still. He wastes more time standing like that, hand in his pants, mouth slightly open, staring at her.

He pulls her out of the bath, he has large, strong hands that leave blue prints on her grey flesh. Water spills onto the floor. The thud of her body onto the tiles is an uncomfortable sound. He checks her Airways, Breathing, Circulation. We know, of course, that she's still breathing. We knew. But he's confused. He shakes her violently when she responds to each obvious question with an obvious stare. In frustration, he lets her slump onto the floor and gets changed into dry clothes before bringing her a towel and joggers, boxers, that too-small school hoodie. She won't move, so he has to dry and dress her. This is awkward. This takes some time. He notes that every time he touches her, it leaves a blue impression. She shivers and he gives her his dressing gown too. Anything to hide those marks. He sees that she does not have skin, she has flesh and is embarrassed. He gives her socks and a beanie hat.

Our view shifts to the top corner of the living room. We can see the sky plus television box. Things move quickly. He creates a makeshift sofa bed using throws, cushions and old bed sheets but by the time he has finished, she has disappeared. She is nestled in his bed, smiling to herself. As the sick fluoresce from the street lamp transforms into blocks of rose tinted sunlight, we see the figure lying curled up on the sofa, his eyes are open. He is not smiling.

He has returned from work, and we see him sitting in his unused study. He makes a phone call. *Hello, police?* He is typing a letter. *Dear Sir/Madam.* He is typing an email. *To Whom It May...* And when he leaves the study, she is sitting by the door, with her mouth a little open. She follows him to the kitchen, where the innards of the cupboards resemble Andy Warhol prints. He opens two cans of soup and heats them in the microwave.

He is much younger and is wearing worse clothes. We see him attempt to put the key into the door. It is a navy sky that hangs above him, and a red haired girl that hangs on his arm. He attempts to put the key in the lock again. She is giggling and he's telling her loudly

to be quiet, he is loud enough to wake up his parents. *TaDa!* The keys dangle limp in the door and his Dad stands in the doorway in a small brown dressing gown and a large red frown. The girl struggles to pull a sober face and he starts laughing. His Dad stands to one side, and points violently into the kitchen where they run inside and put chips in the oven. Dad's frown doesn't last long when he realises that he can eat chips without Mum noticing. Dad makes a makeshift bed on the sofa for the girl, who runs into the bedroom as soon as Dad has gone to bed. They curl up smiling.

He makes her a cup of tea at first. Then a cup of tea and a few biscuits. Soon it's dinner. He uses up his cupboard of beans and Batchelor's products and restocks with olive oils, Be-Ro and fresh chillies. We stand level with him in the kitchen, while she watches behind us. We cannot hear what he is saying, but he talks quickly, he waves his hands around in the aroma of the food he is cooking, or in the aroma of the story he is spilling. He turns to see her reaction to his anecdote and is encouraged by the grey face which does not respond, but which is looking at him.

We see him sleeping on the sofa, while she nestles in his bed. She never sleeps, she only smiles secretly. No matter how many extra blankets he piles on, she remains as cold as the day that he found her. His water bills have tripled and he's started shopping at Waitrose. He goes to work whistling. He took the day he was owed to drive her to the seaside. And she only ever smiles when he isn't in the room. We never even see her speak, she watches as he cooks Thai curry and tells her about his day.

We can see the red haired girl sitting next to him, showing him maps and books. He holds a silk tie in his hand and does not let go. We see the red haired girl holding tickets up, waving them in his face and we see him putting on the silk tie. He's already loosing the smile. We see the red haired girl hugging him at the airport, the silk tie he is wearing is briefly caught in her red hair as she turns to leave. We see him go home. He dusts the new furniture and vacuums up the new carpet fluff. He plucks a few stray red hairs caught on a door handle and puts them in the bin. He goes shopping and buys tinned beans.

One night, our view is looking down onto the bed from the ceiling. We see him wet and naked climb in beside her and pull at the sheets that she has wound around herself. She is not smiling. We see her eyes snap open and a human emotion seeps out from them. She

begins to writhe as he tries to untangle her and then he's on top of her, towering over so that all we can see is his bare back, and his muscles twisting as he tries to get hold of her. She is hidden from view and we are powerless to help. Powerless, even, to bear witness. Fear is olfactory at a time like this. Through shafts of bone and skin, we can focus on his heart so that we do not have to see what is about to happen. Sinew and muscle and arteries are convulsing faster and faster and then they stop. And our vision pulls back and we can see her wrapped tight in the sheets, and he is on the floor by the night stand, blood moving quickly across his right hand which holds his head. He is the creature now, naked and alone and hurt, lying on the floor.

We see him emptying the cupboards of fresh chillies and olive oils. But we see him replace them with nothing. We see him dust the softened furniture and vacuum the hardened carpets. We see him scrub a thin grey line in the bathtub and we see him, with a backpack, lock the door behind him and post the keys through the door. He's locked us in.