

High Security

From the third floor I can see the car lights on the main road, like drops of butter running down a hot wire. We're not supposed to look out of the windows of course in case it unsettles us, but I like to; there's a sense of security in knowing that the world is still there, carrying on, keeping its shape.

It's nice in here. There's no loud noises, everything is hushed and slow; the day moves with a heartbeat rhythm just as it must have before I was born. No-one shouts at me any more, nothing gets broken, my thoughts drop one by one into my head not rushing all at once in that confusing panic like a hundred conversations all needing to be heard. That was how it used to be when Stephen and I lived in the house with the big, wide windows and the lawned gardens where the cats stretched and smiled in the sunshine, teeth and claws hidden in blankets of soft fur, and, during the days while Stephen worked in the Accountants, I used to read books.

All sorts of books I read. Long ones, with titles that never told you what the story was about, but hinted at the mood within – they were my favourites, because I could always tell what kind of book it was. I don't like surprises, sudden noises, quick movements. They disturb me, push the thoughts out of my mind so that I can't concentrate, make room for the voices and the empty, echoing spaces that come between the words. So, I liked those books. But I'd also read others, books with wipe-blurred covers which might have been faces, books where the man and the woman hated each other at the start but then fell in love. I wanted to stop those books and ask them... does the love mask the hate? Is it still there, beneath the flowers and the chocolates – if you lift your bouquet, are there maggots underneath?

Stephen told me I was stupid to read so much. That my world was what it was and I should stop trying to read myself out of it. I had him, and the house and the cats, why did I need stories of other worlds and other minds? I should concentrate on what I should be doing – why was the place such a mess, so filthy? Why did I never clean?

I did clean. I cleaned all the time, dusting and polishing and washing, but still the carpets got furred with a mask of cat-hairs; they'd jut at me like the tongues of sick people, taunting me, teasing me 'why won't you Hoover us?' But they knew why, really. They knew, because every room knew; I hated the Hoover. The Hoover and the car, although I drove the car because not to drive would have meant I was a prisoner. But they both made noises, sudden noises I didn't understand, noises that forced their way into my head like jolts of acid, eating away at my mind until there was only a fragile framework of thought left.

Stephen collected little crystal ducks, with yellow fabric beaks and feet; they sat on shelves in the big room that I didn't like to go in because there were mirrors on the walls. I had to go in, sometimes, to dust, because the little ducks would get covered in grey fuzz like the poor things were trying to grow real feathers. And while I dusted them, I would tell them how they were fooling themselves to think that someone loved them, because they were fragile and stupid and only here because they were nice to look at in the evenings when Stephen got home from work. But one day... I broke one of them. It was an accident, I was trying not to look into the mirrors and I turned and swept one off onto the floor and it shattered.

Noise. Sudden noise and splinters, reflecting in the glass all around, the mirrors, the windows, the other ducks, they all saw, they all shone the mistake back at me, broken into moments of panic and the sound ringing in my head. This time, though, the sound didn't scare me. It was a pure sound, clean; it was the sound freedom makes when it calls through an open door. But it was as though the call had come and gone, leaving me behind, stranding me here in this house, so I tried to make it come back. I dashed another duck to the floor; it bounced on the edge of the rug, its silly little yellow beak flapping and bending like a pretend quack, so I had to throw another. This one broke, properly with a cymbal-strike sound, the slithering of razor fragments across the boards. And another. And another, until I was full of the sounds, my head like a stomach after a huge meal, bulging and replete.

I walked out and shut the door. It was my room now, and I wanted to keep it that way, exactly that way, with the noises all locked into those glittering grin-shaped pieces of glass. If anyone else was to disturb them then the voices might be able to flutter their way free of their crystal walls and find me again to start their whispering and their baby-fingered-guilt tugging at the back of my mind, so I would keep them here, imprisoned with their grief-loaded sussuration inside monuments of dust-covered brilliance.

I spent the afternoon reading. No, not reading, hunting. Hunting through my books for the meaning of what had happened to me; flipping pages in an attempt to replace the voices with real words, solid words set in the black type of certainty. There were no haunting whispers of 'responsibility' within these worlds, no mention of 'blame' or 'tragedy', except for the tragedy of an unrequited love. Books were so simple! Why had I not realised before – but the voices had always clouded things, complicated what should have been effortless. And so my new-found isolation of mind called in the stories to replace the voices, and I read and read and understood as I never had before. Occasionally I would return to my room, check that all was as it should be and that the sharded noises were still undisturbed, then return to my books. All was calm.

Stephen came home, as usual, at six o'clock. The cats who had been plumped around the room like broody hens heard his car arrive and got up, stretching taut as wire, then clustering tight-faced, around the door, missing him. I knew Stephen would go straight to his 'collection', it was what he always did, crooning and stroking those stupid woollen beaks, calling them 'his babies'; what right had he to allow a tight-packed shelf to assume that role? That crooning, that stroking should have been reserved for Julia, and her death should have killed the soft words, struck them silent in his mouth and moved them to sound unspoken in his head; to be whispered in the dark spaces between speech and thought, as the words had migrated in mine.

I followed him to my room, where he stood in the middle of the crunched fragments, staring at the floor. His fingers were twisted around the yellow wool remnants of a pair

of webbed feet, but his hands were bleeding, staining the fabric a bright orange, like a sunset. I think he might have been crying, but I don't remember, because his face was wiped clean when he fell; slipping on the last whole piece of crystal, the duck I hadn't managed to shatter. He toppled, sliding through the glass which studded the carpet like a diamond trap and slapping his head against the edge of the big mirror which stood beside the marbled fireplace – all without expression, without a word. I wanted to ask him if he could hear the voices from down there, if he had disturbed them enough to let them speak, but he lay so quietly that I didn't think he could have done.

They said I'd killed him. That we'd fought and I'd pushed him away. I tried to say I hadn't, that he'd fallen, but I'd already told them about the voices locked inside the broken ducks, so they didn't hear me. Or maybe they did but pretended not to, like I used to do with the noises. So they put me here, where it's quiet and I'm safe and there are no sudden sounds, no more echoes in my mind.

Sometimes it feels quite lonely, without them.