

Establishing shot

We lived in one house that had been divided into two. It wasn't a big house to begin with, but they'd cut it up and made it into two single occupancies. Instead of having an upstairs and a downstairs flat they'd divvied up the rooms between the two tenants, so we each had rooms on both levels. My guess was they wanted to make it feel like two houses rather than two flats. Whatever they were trying to do it didn't work. What we got was a maze of walls and thin corridors, rooms awkwardly lodged in and doors that opened in the wrong direction. Architecture designed precisely to punish a person for being alone. I always assumed my side couldn't physically accommodate more than one body, but I've never tested that theory.

He lived right there behind every one of those walls. We never met but I could hear just about every thing he did. During the long stretches where I couldn't leave the house I spent a lot of time trying to work out the layout on his side, and I reckoned I had it all worked out.

That staircase was something, narrow as hell, I never seen anything like it. They'd put a wall smack down the middle so it was two single files. And the wall was thin, probably just a bit of plasterboard now I think about it. My side was about wide enough for my shoulders, when he went past his body was so close I could get a whiff of him. A greasy sort of smell like cooking oil or something, but I'm sure he never cooked. Occasionally there'd be an aftershave that would linger in the hall for hours after I'd heard him go out.

I've heard him get angry before, just once or twice, a while back. I don't know if it was the same woman as now but I remember it cos it woke me up. He didn't raise his voice or anything, but his bedroom is right above mine and I could feel the tension through the ceiling, like he was standing there shaking you know, just over me while I lay there. And then another time he threw a glass against his kitchen wall- the one that runs along the side of my bed. It didn't break or anything but I knew it was glass because it had that high pitched sound when it bounced off the work top or the floor or whatever. I don't even know if there was anybody there with him that time, but I know it didn't break.

I'm lying dead still in the water up to my neck, listening to two of them going at it. Him going at it, her lying there, taking it. My eyes are fixed on the skirting board, behind the toilet and sink, where you can see the lino has been cut too short and there's about an inch of carpet showing from underneath, and I have the realisation that this bathroom probably used to be one corner of his bedroom.

He gets up and walks away from the bed and then back again, his footsteps soft on the carpet. I picture her lying there still, spread, her eyes on him the whole time. He really lays into her tonight, lays in on thick. I always like to listen out for how she reacts. This one seems to be into it, or she puts on a good enough show anyway.

I shut my eyes and listen to the beat of the bed frame, imagining him on his knees, feet hanging just off the end of the bed, and her on all fours with her back to him, staring forward at the headboard.

The bath has cooled down to almost cold, so I agitate the water with my legs to find some residual warmth. When I look down my skin looks weird, the parts that are submerged appear milky and swollen compared to the rest of me. I'm concentrating hard on keeping my breaths as quiet as possible. The controlled rise and fall of my chest makes little ripples across the surface of the water.

I listen for the contact of two bodies
Hungry for the urgency of your touch
No matter how corrosive
Another pair of hands to make me feel the edges of my own body
A hard touch - let's be clear - as if self control is not an option.

I defer your hands to more comfortable parts of me
My wrists are weak, I say
And you tighten your grip
The carpet burns a scar into the front of my right shoulder
And on my right elbow

There is a mutual understanding that if I put up a fight then you will too
and so you probably think that we are playing the same game
But my comebacks are inadequate
And even if I could make you stop I don't know that I want to

He is getting close now. Occasionally I hear her whimper, but mainly she doesn't make a sound. Then he ejaculates softly, and a minute later feet on the stairs and then the front door.

The taps on the other side of the wall are turned on and a body slides in next to me. Skin rubbery against plastic skids down the back of the bath.