

Everything Must Go

Autumn

The nights are the worst. She is restless in the cavernous bed that she doesn't yet fill. Sleep is brief, consumed with the lumber of dreams and broken-edged sections of the past that stir and heave in the undertow. Tonight she sits up in the blackness, but doesn't know why. Maybe her leg strayed to the cold side. Maybe it was the tapping in the attic again. She thinks it began yesterday, but she can't be sure. Did she dream it? She looks nervously at the ceiling, waiting, holding her breath. But there it is again. A gentle tat, tat, tat in the corner above the wardrobe, like small hands knocking. There's no magic in this world, she thinks. Everything has an explanation. Wind perhaps? But the night is clear and still. She sinks back into her pillows and breathes in the smell of sleep and old hair. This is when she would have leaned over and prodded him, gently of course. *I think there's something in the attic.* He would have grumbled. Told her it was all in her head. But he would have gone up to check all the same. She is not ready for such valour. Hasn't been up there since the day of the fall. Instead she pulls the pillow over her head, and tries to count her breaths. She can still hear a noise, only now it sounds more like soft scratching, distant and muffled. Later, in the greying light, she wakes to silence. She is almost certain she was dreaming.

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Winter

As she chops onions alone in the kitchen on Christmas Eve, she remembers things. How his arms wrapped around her from behind, how his soft lips brushed against her neck and the barely audible *I love you* in her ear. She sips her wine and realises she's already three-quarters of the way through the bottle. *Was it really so bad?* She eats in silence while Ruby spears sausages and stares at her phone. She tells her to put it down. Anything to resume some sort of family tradition around the dinner table. It's too late of course. The damage has been done. Ruby just rolls her eyes and looks back at her screen.

Later the two of them walk side by side through the cold air, down to the moss-clad church in the village. They scuffle past tightly packed pews looking for empty spaces. She feels eyes flicker over her and look away. She thinks people are whispering, but she can't be sure. Husbands and wives and children huddle in neat files, one after the other after the other. They take their place right at the back, next to the drunks and the old man with no teeth. Ruby refuses to sit down and hangs back, shoving her hands in her pockets and fixing her eyes on the floor. As a few strained notes swell from the organ, there is a general shuffle to rise. The men stare ahead, the women, look around, catching one another's eyes and smiling. But they don't look at her. And she feels like a gypsy caravan parked in a row of shiny houses.

As they file out back into the night, Sue and George from next door appear behind them. Sue grabs her arm and pulls her aside.

"So sorry to hear about the accident," Sue hisses in her ear. "Awful bad luck that. Didn't I say so George?"

George nods and stares at his shoes.

"And to such a lovely man too." Her breath smells of boiled egg.

“Now don’t *you* go up on that roof. George will finish off that tiling for you, won’t you George? Just say the word.” She can feel their eyes on the back of her head as her and Ruby make their way back up the lane. She picks up the pace, until she can see the glow of the hallway light in the distance.

Tonight the tapping is louder than usual, a slow, dull thud, echoing into the dark hours. Rain? Hardly. The stars were out and rain doesn’t fall on starry nights. Perhaps then the rain of past days collected in some blocked gutter, now dripping through the roof on the pots of old paint on the attic floor? A trick of domestic acoustics? *Just one of your stupid dreams.* She sneaks into Ruby’s room and climbs into her bed, pulling the duvet tight across both of them like she used to when Ruby had nightmares. She closes her eyes, willing herself to calm down. To stop the trembling. At some point Ruby squeezes her hand.

Spring

Water begins to mutter in the pipes. The boiler chokes and grumbles cholericly in the utility room. One day it falls silent. The dishwasher spews water over the cracked tiles and the kitchen drawer comes away in her hand, cutlery clattering to the floor like gunfire. Outside, the garden is a tangle of knee-high grass and bindweed. In the far corner, the fence nods in the wind, revealing glimpses of Sue and George’s begonias. *It takes two to keep a family you know,* her mother’s voice resonates in her head. The house is in agreement. *Told you so,* it bellows from every room. And still the tapping. Too real and too clear for ghosts. A trapped bird? She lies too afraid to move, too afraid to hear. She will just let it stay. For as long as *it* is up there, and she is down here, what does it matter? Two can live side by side without ever touching, without ever meeting. She will buy ear plugs.

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In the greenhouse she makes a start on clearing the tangle of overgrown tomato plants. Along the shelves, dried wisps of some larger vegetable sprout and droop over terracotta pots. Perhaps she could plant something new? Below, on neat rows of metal hooks, hang all his tools, each one labelled in small, black font. *A place for everything and everything in its place.* She winces at the wooden-handled trowel. Remembers an argument. His meaty hands tugging at her jeans and pushing her face against the glass. In the receding sunlight, she spots the sucky imprint of her hand on the window pane. She tries to wipe it off, but it sticks like tentacles.

Summer

Something catches her eye at Highbury's Furniture Stores in the high street. "*Summer sale – everything must go!*" emblazoned in red across the shop window, a thick line under the *must*. She peers in at the jumble of furniture in the display. Lamps, wicker chairs and sea-themed prints, all stacked around a giant white bed. The bed is the sort he would have hated. An old-fashioned brass type with twisted railings and copper bed knobs, dressed in layer upon layer of flouncy cotton and frills, piled high with cushions the colour of frosting. Resplendent and feminine like a giant wedding cake. She thinks it knows nothing of fear and bumps in the night.

Inside she asks the shop manager for the price.

"Of course we always recommend that both you *and* your husband try it out first. You know...to check for firmness."

"No need," she says. "It's just me." She speaks the words slowly, rolls them round in her mouth and balances them on her tongue, like she is trying them on for size. He leers at her from his frameless glasses and takes her credit card.

She is hopeful when it arrives late one afternoon in August. She watches the deliverymen dismantle the old bed and carry it away, swaying and sweating from its bulk. She is hungry for sleep. Once they have left, she adds new sheets and fat pillows, building layers of throws and cushions like she has seen in a magazine. She stands back for a second to admire her work, then hurls herself at its centre. Lies spread-eagled trying to reach the edges with both hands. Stares at the ceiling and drinks in the silence.

But in the night the tapping returns, bolder and jolting, knock, knock, knock. Realer than real. Ghosts? What nonsense. A fallen lamp, grating and rattling in the wind. She sits up in the moonlight, arms folded. Attempts a mental recollection of the contents of the attic: boxes of Ruby's baby clothes, the suitcases, wallpaper rolls and tins of paint, a crate of old cables that no longer plug in anywhere, but which was kept, just in case. Standard attic matter. Nothing to worry about.

She is brave in the early morning light. She opens the hatch and hauls down the ladder with one hand. She asks Ruby to hold it steady. Ruby hesitates. *Like you did when dad went up on the roof?* Ruby's eyes hold hers, and she wants to drown herself in their pools of grey, right there and then. They stand rooted, eyes locked, neither of them moving, neither of them breathing. She is the first to break away and starts to climb the rickety frame. Too late for recriminations. What's done is done.

The attic is a musty, airless tube. A shaft of sunlight pierces the narrow crack in the roof. The one he was going to mend. She looks around her. Just as she thought; piles of junk, once useful, now mere detritus of a past life. Cardboard boxes, stooped and grey with filth, a bent golf club, his mother's pine chest of drawers, a plastic Santa Claus. And there, underneath the cracked light, a pair of scuffed, brown brogues and a bag of white shirts. She breathes in the familiar scent of Burberry and sweat.

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Above them, hanging on the wall, twisting in the breeze, is his squash racket. Her stomach heaves. He must have put it there the last time she threatened to leave. She yanks it off its hook and fingers it in the dim light. Can still feel the whip of it across her face. The chequered imprint on her cheek. The taste of blood and tears on her tongue.

For it must surely be that, swinging against the wall whenever the wind is up? She tries it out for sound, banging it against the side. A solid knock of wood against plaster. It's almost the same. And yet, perhaps not quite the hollow clang that has been stealing her nights. Bile surges in her throat and she shivers in the thick heat. Her hands work quickly as she gathers his clothes and drags them down the ladder, piece by piece, shoving them into bin liners held taught by Ruby's hands. Perhaps it's time to convert the attic. Make a new bedroom. Rent it out. Everything must go.

Later, she takes a hatchet to the chest of drawers and makes a bonfire in the garden. They watch in silence as the flames flicker and swell with each armful of stale fabric. A plume of smoke, thick as tar, billows into the peach sunset. They save the squash racket till last. It spits and crackles like lard.