

## When She Breathes

The house heaves an audible sigh after their departure. Floorboards creak and groan under my weight as I close the front door, momentarily blinded by the evening sun catching the glass panes. They reflect a reassuring smile at my relief as I go to the front room, bare feet marking prints in the dust.

‘I never thought they’d go,’ he says.

‘Me neither,’ I murmur.

We exchange looks. His eyes and mine, four pools of worry. I avert my gaze, tugging at the grey shabby wool cardigan that had seen better years to cover my skin and the dark marks, pull it around my body, wrap my arms under breasts rendered shapeless by children. The room is cold and I shiver in the half-light.

‘Draw the curtains. It’s getting dark.’

I obey and drag the heavy curtains across the tiny bay window to shut out another fading day. Shadows begin their evening creep around us. He doesn’t tell me to switch on the lights.

The room has lost its odour of stale smoke. Ashtrays are empty and scoured clean. I spent hours at the sink, scrubbing frantically until the skin on my fingers peeled away. I’m glad he has stopped smoking. It was the way he put out the cigarettes that I didn’t like. My glance falls on the dark marks on the back of my hands.

‘Sit down next to me. You’ve done enough for now.’

‘Hopefully,’ I say under my breath. He always knows what’s best.

I reluctantly return to his side. The snuggle-chair whispers secrets as I shift nervously on the stained velvet. He bought it as a Christmas present the year before. *To be closer to him.* I would have preferred perfume or jewellery or a handbag, anything personal, but he had decided otherwise. It’s not in his nature to be demonstrative, though I suppose the wide chair came from a decent enough sentiment.

‘You’re hungry?’ I ask tentatively.

‘Yes, love. Go and get us some dinner.’

He has never offered to help, not once. Sits and waits every evening as I assume my wifely duties.

Shadows in the hallway swirl and shift in my wake like oil on water as I pad silently to the back-end of our small terraced house. Lights are unnecessary. I have walked this path thousands of times before and know every corner blindfolded, know all its secrets, and of recent, have come to enjoy the darkness’ caress on my body as I creep unseen from room to room. It somehow seems appropriate.

‘What would you like to eat tonight?’ I shout back from the kitchen.

Not surprisingly, there is no response. I envision him sitting there, laptop open and engrossed in his regular evening porn session. This is the one thing I hate about him, his obsessions. The rest I can bear, even his strange love and jealousies, but his insistence on forcing me sit next to him on the snuggle chair and pointing at the screen to then ask me to do the same as them, makes my skin crawl. I always refuse. How can I? Then comes the tirade of insults about how I am boring, have no wish for adventure. How I’m ugly, not attractive, don’t satisfy his needs. He usually calms down after a while and our routine settles in again – until the next evening.

The meal from the night before lies uneaten on his plate, so I chuck it into the overflowing bin. They need taking out but that is his job so I tie the plastic, pull it out and put it on top of the pile with the others. I expect he'll take them when going out either for an evening walk or down the pub, though he hasn't moved from the house since the accident two weeks ago. Not his fault, I concede, but it was time he moved around and left the front room. Rotten odours fill the house and I open the back door, not before tilting my head to listen down the darkened hallway to make sure he doesn't catch me. The shadows cling thick to the hallway air, undisturbed by his voice.

I carefully pull open the kitchen drawer, the one with the cheap plastic cutlery tray, and wince as it catches and emits a tell-tale squeal. Or is it a rat? They are attracted by the rubbish and I found one sitting on the cooker the other morning. It gave a bold stare before clambering back down and disappearing through the open cat flap. That silly cat could never suss out how to get through it without the plastic recoiling onto her snout. I couldn't bear to close the flap, half expecting her to appear from the garden at any moment. She was with me for seven years, ever since a kitten. A small black female with a white snout and paw-tips who sought my lap at all times, nuzzled and purred with the affection I crave. How can a man be jealous of an animal? I buried her last week. He never liked cats, especially mine.

The abrasions around my wrist scrape open and bleed as my hand gropes blindly at the back of the drawer to grab my hidden cigarettes. I listen again for any sounds in the hallway and sneak out into the garden. The smell of fresh autumn air in the night and recently overturned earth is a relief from the stinking stuffiness indoors and I gulp down the nicotine fix with pleasure. A guilty pleasure, of course. *Your breath stinks. Not ladylike. You shouldn't smoke.* The word 'shouldn't' means I have no option in the matter. It is just his way of giving orders. It was alright for him to fill the house with smoke, of course, until his accident, when he stopped.

I glance back at the open kitchen door and peer through the shadows. Not a peep out of him. I thought he might want to see the friends who came by asking for him, but he refused. Told me to say he wasn't feeling well. They tried to come in and insisted with worried looks, but I held my ground. His wishes are commands and who am I to go against them?

I take a last puff, inhale the night air to clear my lungs and stroll over to the mound of dead leaves in the darkest corner of the garden. I have been busy today, digging and preparing the soil for winter and raking fallen leaves off the grass. I stare into the hole. The earth is black and moist. I flick the butt into the void and look back at the darkened house. Not one light is switched on. No reflection from other brightly lit homes in the grime-laden window panes. The house holds its darkness like a trapped breath. I know it's looking back at me, watching, wondering if I will return inside. Maybe it's time to treat myself to a holiday in the sun instead of being a prisoner within these four walls, watching the winter wind, rain and misery from behind windows? Fill my lungs with some exotic air? Shall I? I hesitate then lower my eyes and stare into the deep hole.

My steps are lighter as I stride across the lawn and return to the unlit kitchen and slip off my garden clogs. I switch on the light to finish the evening meal preparation. The neon falters then flashes alight, shines attention on the array of Japanese knives hanging on the wall. Honed steel glints above ebony handles. He bought them for my birthday. Very expensive they are, with a magnetic strip to keep them in place. *Maybe they'll make you a better cook,*

*so I thought you might like these.* I do like them. Especially the narrow fish blade which is excellent for gutting the catch from his regular fishing trips. At least, that was what he said he was doing, though I suspected otherwise. I sometimes detected perfume on his clothes and once, it was evident the fish wasn't freshly caught. I found a fishmonger's receipt in the newspaper wrapping. I mentioned it to him. After that he was more careful, I suppose, and his anger at my faltering query deterred me from confronting him again.

'Is dinner ready yet?'

Each evening the same impatient demands and I hold my breath before answering. 'Yes, nearly done. Coming in a minute.'

'Hurry up, will you? It's late – as usual. For goodness sake, woman, you've been in there for hours. If I have to come and get you...'

He doesn't mean the threats. That is his way, always has been. No wonder the kids don't visit as often as I would like. They had enough of him shouting all the time and his bad temper. As soon as they could, they were gone, both of them leaving town and moving far away. I can't blame them, can I? They phone of course, but that's not the same, is it?

He has a look of surprise on his face when I enter with the dinner tray.

'What's up, love?'

He doesn't answer. Just stares at me, eyes wide open and mouth sagging.

'Don't you like what I've prepared? Are you upset because of that?'

Still no answer. He could be excused. Not very chatty after the accident.

'Answer me, please.'

His silence is worrying. He just stares. I notice his eyes aren't brown any more but milky white. How strange, I think. That's not normal. I'm frightened but breathe out slowly and insist.

'You're scaring me now. Come on speak up.'

I hesitate, and for the first time in two weeks, switch on the light. It shines on his grey skin and I notice the stains on the snuggle chair. They are rust red against the beige fabric and cover the whole of the seating cushion, run down towards the bright blue foot rug, spill onto the once pale carpet.

He continues to stare at me, whitened eyes wide in an expression of surprise.

I slowly pass a hand over my neck and feel the old welts of the rope and his tightening grip under my fingers. Remember how he laughed when choking the air out of my lungs until I could barely breathe as he took his pleasure.

*How could you do this to me?* he had whispered in a last gurgle, a look of shock passing over his face as the gutting knife slashed across his throat.

'Because you were killing me,' I answer.

I breathe in deeply. I suppose I should bury him now. Next to my cat he strangled.