

THE QUARRY

Leigh Coyle

The Tin Man

Usually, after I said ‘good morning’ we stood politely smiling at each other until our business was complete. Today, she stayed behind in the shadows and invited me in. I had to hurry to catch up with her as she walked down the hall. I said to her back: ‘How are you?’ because that’s what I would have said to her face at the door. She didn’t answer me. Her bare feet made sucking sounds on the floor as I followed her along. The hall was dim so I couldn’t see much, which frustrated me as I’d often wondered what was in there. One of the rooms opening into the hallway must have been her bedroom, but I never found out which one.

Then we were in the kitchen, which was disappointingly filthy and cluttered. My hands wanted to find a sponge to clean the dirty dishes on the sink. Still facing away from me, she pointed to a table and chairs and filled up two glasses with tap water. I sat down and put my tin on the table. When I rested my elbows on the plastic tablecloth, some crumbs stuck to my skin so I sat back and straightened my tie. Ants made a line on the wall. My nose searched out an odd smell. A radio wasn’t quite on the station. I crossed my ankles under the table, counted the circles on the lino and divided this number by five.

When she turned around, the bruises revolted me – blotchy purple and yellow half-moons under her eyes and at the edges of her mouth. They didn’t match her dress. She looked older than the last time I’d seen her; that sudden aging which happens when you don’t see someone often, although she somehow looked younger

too. I stared at her trying to work this out, while she sat down opposite me and sipped at her water. You're not supposed to stare.

I said: 'I need to go to the toilet.' I couldn't think of what else to say, especially as there was still beauty in her face. She said: 'It's just down the back stairs and to the left.' I must have looked worried, because she also said: 'I'll look after your tin.' There were six stairs, so I went up and down twice. Outside, I breathed in and out a lot and didn't go to the toilet. Her garden was horribly muddled, like her kitchen. If I'd had time, I would have found a hoe and done her edges. I wondered whether I could leave by the back gate, but she was clever by keeping my tin. There were fourteen pots with dead plants in them.

I went back inside and sat down at the table. Her dress was loose at the top so I could see her breasts rising each time she breathed in. I stared at them instead of at her face.

'And you've been well?' she asked. 'Busy?' As if nothing was different. The skin on her chest gathered in the centre and made a dark triangle. She said: 'It must be hard for you. Particularly now. People are such mean bastards.'

I nodded three times quickly. 'I've been pretty busy,' I said. I drank some water for something to do, turning the glass around when I noticed greasy marks on the rim. She tried to smile for a moment, but her lips went flat over her teeth. I heard a noise coming from another part of the house and my fingers gripped onto something sticky underneath the chair. I could tell she wasn't bothered about the sound, the way she kept twirling her hair around her finger. I wondered whether I could ask to use the toilet again. A cat came into the kitchen and tried to rub itself against my legs. I kicked it away. Her glass was dirtier than mine. It disturbed me how she sucked away at the germs. She had seven matching cups hanging from a hook, plus one on the sink which was a different colour.

Then she said: 'Come with me a minute. I want to show you something.' I got my tin and she led me away from the kitchen back along the hall and into the doorway on the right. This room was dark purple like her bruises. It suited her better, but it wasn't her bedroom, because in it there was only a purple couch, a table with a lamp, some white screens and ten wall photographs in frames. The people in the photographs were laughing at nothing, except for a baby all by itself who just looked

startled. I sneezed four times on account of the cat, or maybe the dust. There was a mirror on the wall too. In it, my face looked small and pale like it was far away. She left me standing there while she went through a door at the back of the room. In there, was a dark rectangle, until she turned on a light and I could see her bending over, hair flopping forwards. I kicked the cat again and it made a squeezed noise. She came back carrying a large piece of paper, carefully like it was valuable. ‘Come closer, into the light,’ she said. I put my tin down onto the table and stood beside her near the lamp. I’d never been that close to her before. She smelled like cinnamon and cat. I could reach her breast and grab it if I wanted to. ‘See what I took of you?’ she said.

Under her pink thumbs, stretched out on the paper, was a photograph of me waiting at Central Station. I was standing beside the fourteenth light pole from the end, in the brown pants I was wearing now and my white shirt and tie, holding my bag in front of me. I looked bored, like I’d been waiting forever. I was narrow like the pole and the camera looked down on me. I wondered if she’d taken the photograph from the sky, from the back of a bird. People had left a circle around me, not standing too close. I hadn’t noticed that from down there. I started to count them, but she put the photograph down on the table, next to my tin. She reached for my hand and tried to hold it. She said: ‘I love your face. I want to take more.’

All I could think about was the slitty eyes of the cat and her breasts. I felt dizzy. I said: ‘I need to go to the toilet,’ not out loud, just inside my head. My hand was in hers and it was rougher than I’d imagined, scaly, not moist. My suit pants felt too tight and that wasn’t right. She leaned in closer so her bruises seemed to cover more of her face. I wanted to press them. Again, she stopped her smile part-way saying: ‘Ouch. The surgeon told me not to do that.’

Then the doorbell rang; a shrill sound that scared off the cat and made me think of the other noise from before. She looked at her watch. She said: ‘God. Is it that time already? Sorry.’

She dropped my hand and I grabbed my tin and held it to my chest, feeling my heart beating into it. I followed her back up the hall. I imagined that each doorway was hiding other parts of me I would never see. I counted my footsteps trying to understand. She opened the front door to a bunch of white lilies spiked with a

handwritten sign which said: 'Looking Better Already!' and three giggling women pressed into her with kisses and penetrating voices. As I slid past them and the sick smell of flowers, she pushed some money into my tin. Without laughing, but in a pleased way, she said to the women: 'Just doing my bit for charity, but we're all finished now.'