

Windows

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It was summer, and the little window was open and you could climb up and peep through the window into the house next-door. And there was no sound and no movement in the hot afternoon and through the banister of their staircase you could just make out faded orange wall-paper and sometimes the bedroom door was open and you could see a chink into the room, the corner of a dark brown wardrobe, just a glimpse.

There was only one thing you were supposed to do in the little blue room and after a long time when you'd finished looking you did it, when your father banged on the door and said come on out. And you pulled the toilet paper, it was called Izal and came off in little pieces with rows of dots called perforations. You pumped the long handle, twice because it was heavy and hard and noisy and afterwards he complained mildly that you didn't need to use so much Izal. That was after you didn't let him come in any more, when you wanted to be by yourself, shutting the big bolt with your thumb, ouch because it was so stiff. Because you wanted to look out of the window. They had two dogs, large fierce red dogs called Chows. Down in the alleyway between the houses you could sometimes see them mooching about and if you yelled they got excited and you could make them bark wildly because they couldn't tell where the noise was coming from.

Other rooms led off the top of the stairs from a place called the landing. The place was big and five doors led off into five rooms and in one corner of the landing was a big white chest of drawers that contained all the packed-away things in the world that were not in the cupboard under the stairs, clean-smelling things like handkerchiefs and jewellery, soap and Christmas decorations and twin-sets. One of the doors was next to the little blue room, where you had to push your way past the airing cupboard door that always swung open with the draught and reach over into the basin called bolding lyric and splash your hands. There was a piece of glass above the basin but it was not a window because you

couldn't see through it, frosted and dirty-looking even after so much Vim so there was no reason to linger except on Friday nights when you had a bath.

Afterwards your hair was pulled tight into plastic curlers that squeezed your brain and made you feel dizzy, and downstairs by the fire you roasted one side of your face until it was red while the other side was cool as alabaster and no matter how often you turned the other side it never felt as hot. And you weren't allowed to poke the fire in case it spoilt the perfect symmetry and you learnt all about fires by watching your father, the way he did it, the little balls of newspaper scrunped up not too tight, the sticks of wood that came in small bundles threepence a time from up the road, the coals that came from a bunker in the garden. Big salty coal sacks brought in by huge men in black capes wearing hats with long flaps down the back. The coal men.

The sitting-room window was a bay window and you could only see the monkey-puzzle tree in the front garden and houses over the road and people plodding along the pavement and hardly ever coming to our door and now and then when the weather was bad planes lumbered over the rooftops droning their way to the airport. Inside the room was the fireplace and sometimes there was a fire and sometimes a work of art because even while it burnt the pile of shapes glowed the same for hours then sank with a little sound – shoof! – lower and lower and then your father took the pieces of coal from the coal scuttle one by one and carefully rebuilt the symmetry. His chair was next to the fire and that was so he could sit there after work until long after you went to bed and on Fridays you could lean against his knees and roast your hair until it dried even on the cold side and then the relief, the relief, like floating up to the ceiling, when the curlers came out and you felt like two people, one sitting there on the floor and the other up near the china bowl where the moths pinged round and round until they stopped and lay in the bottom, where you could see them still feebly fluttering, until the brushing had stopped and your head came back down again, bouncy and tingly.

Downstairs was sometimes better than upstairs and sometimes it wasn't. But from the window at the top of the stairs you could see the side wall of next door's house all

drainpipes and window ledges and pebble dash where pockets of sooty dirt and cobwebs dangled, like seeing someone's spotty profile when they weren't looking. Just below were the dustbins and sometimes the boys played rough in the alley-way and beyond that the garages - one was ours and we never saw into the other one - and beyond that the apple tree which you sometimes climbed to paint the woolly aphids while your mother held the jam jar up to dip your brush into the smelly white liquid, don't let it drip on your clothes, paint the tree, find the woolly spots. So that in the autumn we had round apples called Cox's orange pippins not very sweet but not sour either, and sometimes you could see Mr Bourguine next door sweeping the leaves and muttering.

The window at the bottom of the stairs was leaded, coloured like a magic lantern and it was a beautiful window and it showed the outside changing from white to grey and sometimes pale watery blue. When the telephone arrived it sat right there and blocked the view and people sat on the stairs one by one and to christen it we phoned Auntie Ellie and she said something and people answered one by one and when it was your turn the black Bakelite thing dropped into your hands like a fat clumsy vase and the wires were all twisted up with excitement. People said, Say Something. After a long time you heard a voice, it was Auntie Ellie they said and she was invisible and omnipotent, a voice saying my name and a voice seeing right through me and out the other side and saying What Have You Been Doing? And I ran, ran down the last three stairs and over the black-and-white marble hallway past the round mirror and along the red passageway to the kitchen and banged the door shut and hid in the warmth of the stove by the back door. From a little window above the sink I could just see the top of the back gate, and the sky. And the sky was blue, deep azure blue.

The view from the back bedroom upstairs was wide open and it made you feel like a king and you could fly out like a bird and see all up and down the gardens, all the private worlds between the creosote fences exposed like underwear, shockingly, enticingly. It was infinity and there was nothing above you but the roof and a few telegraph wires and you could almost touch the sky and down there you could fill the space between you and the ground a thousand times with all things imaginable. And you could play with the

gardeners like dolls in a doll house, move this one here that one there, confuse them with roses that look like cabbages and mix them up so that they shook their fists but they could never catch you because you were a bird high, high above them. And sometimes there was no-one there but you could imagine eyes on you from all the flower-beds looking at you looking, menacingly, filling the space between the seer and the seen, and it was a kind of knowledge that scared and thrilled, exciting your body, a portent of something to come, some guilty feeling of secret sensuality. Your desires were exposed, a voyeur no longer you plummeted into the hands of the ground below, the gardens fell upon you and pulled you helpless into the secret shame of roots and tendrils.

Only one window of the house was a walk-through window, it was called a French window and opened off the gloomy back dining room and it was hardly ever open. But in high summer you climbed over a step out into the patio into the blinding light and past the coal bunker and the tool shed down the path, faster, faster past the bird bath and the runner beans and the raspberry canes grabbing a handful and the sweet juices spurting into your mouth and suddenly you went through the pages of a book – and all was transformed. Now you were in a forest of climbing roses, now standing on the rockery, surveying the world, your fortress of alyssum and lobelia giving way onto faraway lands of knights and princesses whom you were ever trying to save, adventures wild with the scent of lavender.

The best window of all was the one that made the rhythm of going to sleep and waking, your bed up against the wall next to it, a bay window just large enough that when the curtains were closed and after your mother made you say our father who art in heaven you said goodnight and pretended to go to sleep and afterwards you could crawl through the curtains and sit there for hours and hours looking down the road where the old elm trees rustled. And in one of them the owl hooted twittwoo and you could never see him but he knew you were there. And the lamps dropped pools of light on the pavement and in summer it was not even dark and people talked in the street across the fence and later sometimes lovers hand in hand moving between the pools and somewhere a distant roar of traffic so that you knew you were on the edge of great things.

And the road curved just where you could no longer see and long after you could hear cars drawing nearer and nearer they came into view and they went away again for a long time. The dark sky often racing with clouds tinged yellow from the sulphurous glow of the street, scudding this way and that across the stars and the moon. The moon sometimes came out and stared and raced without moving until you crawled back to bed by the light from the landing and the sounds from downstairs. And when the house was finally dark and silent there was nothing to see but the furniture coming to life and then with eyes squeezed shut you could see kaleidoscopes of colours and shapes purple green red gold white diamonds until your head ached and then under the bedclothes hands pressed against ears to shut out the goblins now rampaging through the room you sang melodies, sonatas, symphonies of delight that rang and rang full volume in your reeling head louder and louder until your father shuffling in his slippers and dressing-gown stopped the visions of your singing, saying come on, and took you downstairs for milk and sometimes the only way to stop you was between your parents in their big mahogany bed with the blue silk cover.

No memories of going to sleep despite trying to find that moment and capture it and waking up in the morning the big bed empty and sheets still crumpled and warm. And stealing a few minutes at the dressing table you could move the side mirrors and see windows into long dark passages that went on for ever and ever, repeating over and over again the blue-green from the curtains and bedspread like a sea until the waves finally swallowed themselves in a distant infinity. Out of this upstairs bedroom you saw past swishing green curtains and layers of netting a view all blurry, chimneys and treetops and sparrows twittering their dull morning prose doing business under the eaves and far away tiny planes slithering silently in the sky carrying people to distant lands, their small squares of windows with people sitting in them drawing you further and further, out of the house, out of the sunlit suburb, out of the great city, upwards and onwards.