

Breadcrumbs

“Dusk, that time between day and night when everything changes...”

The unexpected glittering took her breath, stilled her with tiny ice swords.

“Wow,” said Elizabeth, “It’s beautiful.”

“What?” asked John.

“The garden, look, it’s all white.”

During the night a thick hoar frost had lain down to sleep outside. Creeping in the darkness, it had flowed silently over every external surface whilst they were closeted inside, a pale, immobilising lava.

“So you’ve not seen damn frost before, is that it? Always a fucking drama...” John yanked open the cutlery drawer with a metal rattle of tray bones. At the window Elizabeth folded her arms. She noted the single mug at the boiling kettle, the reflected solitary spoon tap-tap-tapping against the worktop.

“But it’s pretty, though, don’t you think?” She didn’t know where this pleading came from.

Her grip on the sink edge tightened as thick sausage fingers circled her wrist. She cried out when the scalding metal teaspoon pressed as a reminder onto her arm, a burning watch face on a bracelet of bruises.

“What’s for dinner tonight?” asked John.

Crossing to the fridge, Elizabeth knelt, her eye and cheek hidden by a curtain of hair, dulled and raggedly cut.

“We only have...” but on hearing the rude click of the key in the back door Elizabeth breathed again in the relief of an empty kitchen. Through the glass lay a thread of footprints, a million tiny ice crystals crushed and melted.

By 9.20 next morning the dirty green and urban greys had returned, the dawning wonderland disappeared. The chill window pressed Elizabeth's forehead into a smoothed plane. She shook free of emotion as the medication began to work, rolling over her limbs like hot bath water.

By 11.43 her tea was cold in the mug, a thin surface film adhering to the edges in a coarsening scum.

By 14.14 the day's brief winter sun had been and gone. Too weak to warm the earth or the sagging washing on the line, it had retreated, given up for another day.

By 16.55 the path to the pavement sparkled once more with sharp miniature gems, crunchy underfoot. Elizabeth sat on the freezing bricks of the low wall. Starlings chattered at her from the high wires as they gathered for a noisy bedtime outside the closed eyes of the houses opposite, doorway mouths double locked and bolted against callers. Her foot hurt – the broken glass had cut a red spider web on the sole. She ate the dry sandwich she had made earlier in the day to quieten her growling stomach.

By 17.05 Elizabeth was dressed in the warm clothing she kept in the bag with shoulder straps, hidden in the alleyway of number 45. She would miss her kind neighbour. Lacing new trainers with stiffening fingers she rose and brushed herself down, crumbs falling from the hand-knitted wool.

From the bag she took out the orange purse with the sixty-two pounds in it, and the train ticket to Greenwich paid for by her sister. A single. Elizabeth supposed that she was, now, and she set off up the darkening street.