

**The House of Women**

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*pp. 7–58*

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She's standing on the dance floor.

Her eyes are wreaths of light, her hair a tangled halo, male arms like sea serpents all across her sweaty skin. She laughs, baring her throat, the high heels stamping dark grey full stops onto the floor.

*I want to dance with you, you want to dance with me? Kiss me. You have such big hands, you're so tall, your shoulders wider than a door.*

She kisses him, he caresses her, whispering into her hair. She bites his ear, that soft pillow; someone else grinds against her. She pinches his cheek, his buttock, oh, anything could happen.

She's just drinking people's drinks, smoking their cigarettes.

*I think you should come with me,* says a man.

But she probably shouldn't.

Time in a stream, drinks and rainbow umbrellas, clouds of smoke, warm tongues, her jacket somewhere on the floor, her bag in a corner, her shoes tossed under the table.

Got to remember to keep her dress on.

M is at the table with the bottles and a smile, waving at her. She's hard to wave at, smeared everywhere.

Snappish as a dog.

But then: look at the way she bumps into a table, slips to the floor. The way the music stops and the lights come on, as though they're in a sports hall.

This is what freedom looks like sometimes: free to, free of, free from.

*Ugh, gross.*

*Shame on you, you old tart.*

*Don't listen,* shouts M in the middle of the hall.

But she listens, she listens with bleeding knees, broken heel, burning hair.

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She's left her husband.

She's just moved in with M, her friend and doctor.

She's sleeping in M's guest room, sitting on the furniture where M's husband once sat, eating with the cutlery he once used to prod at the food, before he went off with the young woman.

M has been alone for six months. She's moved on. *The worst is over*, she whispers. They're a stepfamily now, she and M.

M still smells his shirts.

She helps M throw his record collection out of the window. They watch it smash on the asphalt, and they burn his ring binder in the wood-burning stove.

*I can't dance tonight, says M, tonight I'm going to lie on my kitchen floor and scream. Our families are drifting like wreckage on the seas, they're homeless hermit crabs. We were the conch shells where they were meant to live.*

*M, we were never conch shells*, she says.

*I can't smell the children, I can't feel their cheeks.* M is slumping towards the kitchen floor.

*You've been a good mum, you always picked them up early from nursery. You let them smoke in secret, now they're older.*

*My kids are Russian dolls, their chubby little bodies all the way inside, and I'm the only one who can see they're still there*, says M, now lying on the floor.

M is a sea anemone, a snow angel. She closes, opens, shrinks. A deep dark howl, a long note drawn across a landscape.

*I've made you a drink*, she says to M. *Come on, get up. After today will come tomorrow, and after tomorrow will come the next day, and then the children are coming. You only have to sleep twice, then they'll come.*

Piece by piece M gathers up her limbs, downs the drink, and pours more into the beautiful green glass, the music a sea of syrupy rose-tinted memories. They flop onto the sofa, onto the patch stained with blood.

*That's where he fucked that woman on her period*, whispers M.

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Her children come to visit M's new place, well-behaved as puppies. They cuddle M's tomcat, whose yellow eyes scowl with mistrust. It's nice, cuddling up with something soft.

In the apartment she's found, her children are allowed to take a beer from the fridge without asking. They're allowed to take long showers. They're allowed to operate her remotely from their beds. More food, bring water, shut the door.

Flowers in vases, bowls of sweets next to the beds she has made for her kids. She smiles, moving cautiously across the floorboards, and laughs too loudly, switching swiftly back to the voice she makes sound soft. The calm, safe, slightly darker voice. Her hands stray to the children's faces, into their hair. Her shoulders, thighs, closer and closer to the children's bodies.

And always the proper smell of cooking from M's kitchen.

*Mum, you're crying.*

*No, I'm peeling onions.*

*But you aren't.*

*Yes I am, look!*

*You're not like you used to be.*

*How did I use to be?*

They don't want to sleep at hers. They'd rather sleep at home where they belong, where he's sitting in the corner, waiting.

The children exist on the level of the heart. Words bounce off, words drown in the rising water. Their hearts beat in the rhythm of their eyes. She can't switch off the words, lying still as bodies washed ashore, ready for when the children come again.

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She's round as a ball, like a woodlouse under the duvet in the guest room, an old, forgotten hotel.

*Come into the living room. Mum and Dad have something we'd like to discuss with you guys,* she said.

*Mum and Dad aren't going to live together anymore.* A voice from far away has practised saying those words, while she is forced to see the children's big bodies, their big, wild eyes. Quickly, their mother adds something that makes it all better again.

*It's not your fault. At all.*

*Mum doesn't want to live here anymore.* His face a stone, an empty cave, the children mechanically turning their heads to understand the stone's language.

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*My darling, he told her in another life, your mouth, your way of speaking, walking. What you do when you unbutton your blouse.*

M draws the blind, opening it to the streetlamps with a smack. Reaching into the bed, M grabs one arm, grabs the other arm. Hauls her body into a sitting position. She gets one leg over the edge of the bed, then the other one, then pulls her upright. M drags her into the kitchen draped over her back, then lets her slide onto the floor.

*You can borrow my red dress, you can borrow my good shampoo, you can borrow my bag, you can borrow my jewellery, you can borrow my money, you can borrow my kids. They're coming tomorrow.*

\*

M's children come. They're angry. The food is too spicy, the ketchup isn't Heinz. They stay in their rooms. Their dad has bought the screens that light their faces with a cold glow. M serves them food on trays in bed, big cakes and crisps, in a dress that makes her skin glint red.

*I guess you'll be here half the holiday,* says M, smiling at her kids.

*Our friends won't come out here – it's too far to cycle,* says M's youngest son.

*You can have parties here.*

*It's easier at Dad's. The house is so big, and we have our own entrance in the basement,* says M's eldest son.

*But you've got to come over!*

*That's not your decision,* says M's youngest son.

*I'm sure we'll drop by, Mum,* says M's eldest son.

*Dad left because you were always so angry,* says M's youngest son.

*Dad left because he found someone else,* says M.

They're gone before M has washed their clothes, cut their hair, heard even one little secret.

The apartment reeks of angry children.

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She calls him. They need to talk about the kids. They need to talk about money, about the furniture, the holidays, the weekdays, the split, how to carve up the cake. She'd rather not discuss the albums. He doesn't pick up, she doesn't leave a message. She calls four times then leaves one about the kids, the money, the furniture and the box in the attic full of old Christmas baubles made of hand-turned glass, a present from her mother.

*He doesn't want to talk to me, he doesn't want to see me.*

*Getting a divorce takes time. Maybe next week, next year, says M.*

*Will I ever figure out how to live without him? I think of him as a hand, a glue, a cradle.*

*I think of him as a leash, the leash he had on you.*

*He wrote that I had betrayed him, that I'm not who he thought I was.*

*You aren't.*



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She takes a shower. The drain is clogged. Cloudy, lukewarm water swilling round her feet. Hair, the greasy dregs of soap, the smell of sewage. The impurity colours her skin grey. She reaches for the wine glass on the sink. The point was to feel fresh, to slather herself in M's new oil. She towels herself off, dresses, has another glass of wine, finds some other clothes. A glass of wine, she puts on sunglasses, a glass of wine, another glass, she walks out the door, shuts her eyes, ends up at a café, sits down. The couple at the table move a coat, a bag, a big bunch of flowers far away from her, straightening in their chairs, their fingers twined into a clenched fist like a lump on the table. She rises, her arms dangling uselessly, before latching onto the menu at the bar. The waiter moves his lips, his suspicious eyes; it wasn't a cup of tea she wanted.

The couple glance over as she sips the thin tea, laughing even louder than before.

Just you wait, arseholes.

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*Why do you always close the windows? It's stifling in here. And why don't you ever say anything? Don't you have anything to say, anything you're not satisfied with, angry about, hurt by? Something I've said or done that you need to talk about?* she said.

*You sleep badly, that's why you're so grouchy. I don't have anything to say – what am I supposed to say? You create problems where there are no problems,* he said.

*But you seem angry. You shut me out, you turn your back. You leave, you return without a word. You haven't always been this way. What's made you like this, what's happened?*

*That's a question you should ask yourself.*

*That's all I do.*

*Then I can't help you.*

*What do you know that I don't? What have I done?*

*You should know.*

*Then I can't apologise.*

*I can't tell you what you should be apologising for.*

He was watching TV, she wanted to read. He was watching science programmes, and the sound of science programmes is louder than the sound of other shows.

Her breathing when he switched it off.

The smell in the bedroom changed.

*It's because we're getting older,* he said.

The words made the old smell settle in the bed and on their bodies, no matter how much she aired it out. In the end he smelled of butter that's been left too long in the sun.

She'd be able to recognise his smell from before the butter, as though he were her own newborn baby. They say mothers can sniff out their newborn from millions of others. It made her panic to make a mistake at that exact moment, with her nose buried among all the newborns, unable to find her own child with her bungling instincts.

What should she do now about his smell?

*You're not exactly young anymore, but you've still got a nice face,* he said.

She was tidying up in another room.

*You're overreacting. Women going through the menopause do that, you'll go back to normal. You should know that sometimes people take it personally when you're upset, that's why they go on the*

*defensive. When you smile it means they're doing something right. When you're angry you speak in long sentences: they're prepared, they stick, they're impossible to penetrate. It takes time to come up with a proper defence. We shut down. Your mouth moves, it's unstoppable, it sounds like you're calling men pigs, like you're calling me a pig, and a pig can't talk, it doesn't have a hope in hell of defending itself. Meat tastes awful when it's stressed. If you'd just give me more of the positive energy everyone else gets, if you'd just smile a little more, he said.*

*I can't smile if I'm trying to guess why you're so quiet when you shut the door. Why do you shut the door?*

*You're the one who started sleeping in a separate bed. You took away the one remaining place where we were together.*

*You shut your eyes when you touch me, when you say you love me.*

*I love you, he said with open eyes.*

\*

M's cleaning lady is a man. He's just gone, the floors are still wet. She can't look at him, can't look him in the eye, although he doesn't seem embarrassed by his job. It's for her own sake that she peers at him only with a veiled, near-sighted look.

M says he's afraid of animals; or perhaps he just doesn't want to change the litter tray. Perhaps it's beneath his dignity. Perhaps he thinks of dignity while he cleans M's toilets.

Next time she'll look him in the eye.

There's a stench rising from the cat litter. She roots through it with a scoop designed for the purpose, sifting the litter between the holes. It's much too small for the long cat turd that emerges. The turd must be hacked in two. She scoops up half, trying to balance it into the bag she's holding in the other hand. The litter keeps sifting down from the scoop, down between her toes. As she tips the turd into the bag, the plastic handle bends and it touches her hand. She smells her hand and reassures herself. Normal people are attracted and repelled by shit, by the animals they once were.

She lies down on top of the clean laundry on the bed, in the guest room. The mayflies' wings, the room's dried rose petals, the long legs of her trousers in the splits on the floor, the bottom of her underwear visible.

The tomcat jumps up onto her belly, stretching his soft, warm, animal legs, licking her with his rough little tongue, kneading her thighs with his paws, purring on her body with a deep vibrating noise. She squeezes him tighter and he digs in his claws. The blood bubbles out like small red pearls.

She throws him onto the floor. He lands as though he had jumped. Soft, controlled. She kicks out at him, runs after him, kicks him hard under the table, kicks the chairs, hurls a cushion.

Plodding onward, plodding round and round, poking her face into the fridge and a finger into the tub of hummus, drinking milk from the carton, taking out a pizza box, eating the dry old pizza with the soft crisps from the bowl on the worktop.

Nice parents with buggies, white toy dogs on the street. The windowpanes are huge; there's space for the loved-up couple under the chestnut tree, too. The drawings in chalk are glowing on the asphalt. Where did the time go? When did her children stop selling things from their rooms, sitting intently on a patterned blanket, mouths green with juice?

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*I assume you're going to fill out the divorce papers, and you'll change your name back. I don't want you having my name! Post them today,* the text reads.

*Can't, not until tomorrow. I'm working today,* she lies.

*You're the one who wants to get divorced.*

*You're the one who wants a signed document.*

*When you move in with the children's new father, I want to make sure you don't take them away from Copenhagen.*

*There is no one new, and the children already have a father.*

*If the children are even mine.*

No wine in the fridge, no wine in the cupboard, don't touch M's wine rack, don't grab that bottle.

It tastes expensive. It's a gift from a patient, it says so on the card tied with a ribbon around the bottle's neck.

A computer, a document, a click in two windows, sent. The money transferred, a print-out, one line to sign, one for each of them. The piece of paper is on the table now. One pen doesn't work, the second does. The back of her hand rests on the paper, ready with the pen, the hand that doesn't obey.

She throws up on the living-room floor, in the hallway, in the loo. When she comes back in, the tomcat's head is in the vomit. She chucks the pen at him, missing. He just keeps eating. She chucks the wine glass at him too, a million glass shards everywhere, the red wine from his paws all across the floor.

*Sorry, M.*

*You go lie down, I'll sort this out.*

*No, no.*

*You think it's just paperwork.*

*Yeah.*

*But it's not that at all.*

*No.*

*You think you get divorced when there's no love left, but love's still skulking round the corner like an uninvited guest.*



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*Have a good day at work, sweetheart, says M in the morning.*

*You too, sweetheart. Shall I pick up stuff for the chicken?*

*Ooh, yes, you make amazing chicken.*

Mother and mother go to work.

The disabled teenage girl with brain damage – small hands and feet, hands and feet that aren't used – doesn't grow, eternally a three-month-old baby at home with her mum, eternally suspected by the local council, eternally destined for an institution. Eighteen-year-olds need stimulation outside the home.

What does a person like that think, a person who cannot speak, cannot express pain? To know when something is unpleasant, when something hurts, you need to know her sounds: that little twist of the mouth, the eyes that lose their smile.

She is the helper.

The helper touches the baby's skin, washes her, shaves her legs and the pubes up her belly; she braids her hair, kisses her forehead. She smells thickly of hormones. She likes music: she cheers when the helper sings the old songs the helper sang for her own children. She is very quiet and wide-eyed when the helper cries.

She is the helper, shutting her eyes when she feels the baby's skin, so like her daughter's skin, the skin that once she could not leave. The way her daughter lay on her side, her little fist clenched under one ear. Her chubby belly, the curve of her back. In those days she was a mother, guarding her nest like a hawk.

They go to rhythmic movement class, where there are mirrors in which the helper and the baby's mum can see themselves. They try to follow the teacher's instructions. Their eyes meet in the big mirrors, but they act as if they don't see it; they act as if the activity is completely normal. The baby doesn't look in the mirror, she can't see that far. Her mother guides her spasming arms, and the baby looks at her arms, at her mother's arms. She whines, howls with joy, mimics her mother's and the helper's broad smiles, their loud voices. The helper beats a little drum. They've got good at the song they've been practising. Soon they will perform it at a concert.

The helper kisses her on the cheek before she says goodbye. The baby leans her head against the helper, getting one more kiss. The helper lingers, holding her hand. She can't say goodbye. Perhaps she doesn't even know the helper is leaving. She can't go with the helper out the door.

If she knew the helper was leaving, she would wave. If she could wave, she would wave at all her helpers. If she could talk, she would have a light voice. If she could swim, she might not drown when the ice melts, when the water comes.

Her mother looks at the helper, and the helper looks at the mother. Their looks could mend a butterfly's broken wings on the other side of the world.

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She goes to the supermarket looking for chicken. She sees the sign for poultry, a man's strange hands on the glass counter. Pulling open a panel, she reaches for the organic chicken breast, her hands groping around inside the freezer. Their hands see each other; she has to look up into his face, and the faces bring about a meeting. She ends up putting a pack of chicken liver in her basket.

He catches up with her by the bike rack, exactly as she might have wished, but she cycles away. Something is definitely loose in the frame. It's impossible to see clearly, like she's perpetually about to fall over. The other cyclists better not get too close, the way she's wobbling.



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*So, how's it going today?* asks her mother on the phone.

*How do you cook chicken liver?*

*I've no idea.*

*When did you go through the menopause?*

*Mid-forties. It's been years, I don't remember very well.*

*How do you keep things separate?*

*You can't.*

*Why have we never talked about this?*

*You never asked.*

*You should have warned me.*

*You don't usually like that sort of conversation. You were so furious when I put flags outside the house to celebrate your first period.*

*You said I had become a woman. But what am I now?*

*Now you're free of it. Yes, you'll sweat a little, and yes, you won't always be in a good mood, your pussy might be dry, but it was like escaping from a prison when I left your dad. Everyone deserves to get divorced. Divorces are good for the figure. You learn from a divorce. You make new friends, a new home. My pussy is wet again, and I'm so pleased with my new oak table top, just wait.*

\*

M has been in her husband's and the menstruating woman's house. The children's tasteful rooms, wine on the table, a new wooden terrace, exotic plants in big pots, lanterns in shades of blue. The young woman wants to be a decent human being and show the mother of the sweetest kids on earth what their new life looks like, to be the one big family they so easily could be.

M didn't know happy people could be so cruel.

*It must be nice to know that the woman cooking for your kids has good intentions,* she says to M.

*My kids sat between him and her. I sat opposite.*

*We'll invite them here, then we'll sit either side of the children and they'll sit opposite.*

*Those photos on Instagram, my son's beautiful girlfriend on his lap. Those photogenic breakfasts and lit candles. They all look so happy round that massive table in the mornings.*

*That's just how it looks.*

*That's how it is.*

*No, it just looks that way.*

*That doesn't make me feel any better.*

*Putting on an act like that is always a strain on the kids.*

*That's even worse.*

\*

They're standing in the bathroom, their bodies naked in the mirror after a shower, the years etched into their skin like the rings of a tree, the Norns picking, scraping the hair on their pussies, their arms, legs, brows, teeth, arses, spinning their threads, drawing their eyes black under their glasses, their smiling knees, the thick blue lanes of blood they cover with beige, lipstick flowing into tributaries. Their laughter at the decaying flesh runs down the bare white tiles.

*You're gorgeous, says M.*

*You're gorgeous too, cheers!*

*Fuck menstruating women, fuck everyone in their thirties and the self-absorbed, anally fixated projects they make of their kids.*

*Yeah, fuck them!*

*Here's to plucking the grey hairs on your cunt!*

*How many have you got?*

*Who's counting?*

*Cheers. Now let's go get shit-faced. M has lipstick on her teeth.*

Their hopeful hearts and summer-softened eyes, casting themselves into the sea, swirling, swirling, swirling, swift faces, swift hands, then different colours, so much warm skin.

Swaying rim of flesh, pink meatloaf, the smell of old apples, fried bacon, of aftershave, swollen lips, chins skinless from bearded kisses tossing back and forth in the swell.

Pick me, pick me, pick me, the small men, the fat, the handsome with the short legs, the ponytails, the ones with the wide feminine arses, the dancer, the one who smells of teeth, that one, that one, that one, that one, that one, that one, so many possible steps.