

Skuren

The kettle hasn't boiled. Crisp white linoleum, the doors of cabinets and cupboards opened and closed, and a door that isn't broken, and I find myself tapping my forefingers on the countertop. The kettle isn't boiling. The drapes collapse like clouds, clinging to steel. I repeat a beat in my head with the tapping – tap, tap tap, tap – and then it ends. I open one of the cupboards, find a clean, pale-white and gold mug, it looks like I've barely touched it before. The kitchen looks mostly unused, almost untouched, but here and there are signs of life – the tea towel slumps upon the hanger, and I leave my shoes by the door. The door to another kitchen.

There are no windows in here, but I understand how the world looks out there. Decay, of all things, and ruin, unheard of in the kitchen. Thrown out of a kitchen. Down the trash chute or the sink, garbage disposed. It's good there are no windows.

I remember when it wasn't empty, the kitchen. A bustle as pantry doors open and close, and they peered into glass mirrors reflected on the splashback, and then one day the doors opened no more. People abandoned. They realised the four walls were three – one of four was always a reflection, as if in a television show set, one wall for the audience to laugh through.

It's good there are no windows.

A gust of cold wind would chill me, chill me and these bones. It's lukewarm, the average for inside here, aircon's busted and dead. This place is insulated, no doubt – that's something at least. I try not to think about air-conditioning. I'll be fine without it.

I've been waiting for something. Some days I wander outside, past the kitchen, to see if by some wonder it has arrived. For its size, this place, I don't get lost so much anymore. It's so familiar. I return now to the kitchen, staring at the kettle. The black kettle. Then I hear a knock at the door.

He's come back. He knocks at the door, the door from one kitchen to another, and then another door to another, and then he knocks again. When I tell him to come in, it isn't him.

She smiles, calmly, and unloads her backpack down on the kitchen counter. Her hair, colour of rubble, colour of ash, is tied up into a ponytail, and she smells of pond and botched perfume. Finishing unpacking, she glances around the place – the picture-perfect room, startled by change. It startles her, too.

"I wish I could boil you some tea," I begin, "but the kettle is broken by now." She laughs, mostly to herself. She runs a finger along the benchtop. "Nathan, by the way."

"Lily," she mumbles, wandering around the kitchen. It would look different to out there, I'd imagine. Almost pristine but crumbling still. You wouldn't notice from a distance.

We sit down at the breakfast bar, and she pours herself a mug of water from a bottle in her backpack. It's ugly, there on the benchtop. "So, you came here then?" Her voice is coarse, roughened from outside, no doubt.

"I was here, standing in this kitchen," I mumble, glancing around me. "I didn't think there was someplace else to go from here." She sighs, swallowing a mouthful of water. She's so ugly in this kitchen. But she's company.

I ask her about her trek here. She asks me if there are any biscuits, and I fish out a packet from the back of the pantry – I stocked up the day it came. Lucky.

She stares out through the *window* to the world beyond. “He told me you would welcome me, like I was just another house guest,” she says, biting into a biscuit. “He sends his best.”

I feel like a war-awaiting wife, despite my manhood down there. Sometimes I idle in the doorway, overseeing nothing much in particular, but other days I forget there is worry. I’d spread butter on the bread, thin, and bite into it without fussing. Then it all feels whole again. You don’t notice how long that lasts until it ends.

“This is as close to a home as can be,” I say. My voice lingers. It trails off.

About half an hour later, she tells me, staring up at that ceiling, that she would’ve liked a place like this if she could have had her way. “I live in a place downtown,” she mutters, “it looks like a wreckage, like one of those boats crumbling upon sand.” She traces a finger along the linoleum under her, feeling for any edges. I sit beside her, downing a cup of water, lukewarm. It’s peaceful, almost – and not knowing what’s beyond the crispness is better.

“When did you see him last?” I whisper out and regret it almost immediately.

“A few days,” she replies, “maybe a week.”

The walls of the kitchen are a dull, lifeless colour now, or at least that’s how they seem. They would have been white and baby blue, and touches of grey. Once. Maybe it’s my scope of things. My eyes are foggy, like glasses could be, and they need to be wiped, maybe.

She asks for something else to eat, beside the biscuit from earlier. I scour for something else in the cupboards, something more satisfying than the biscuit, and realise how little food is in this kitchen now. Bit by bit, it returns to its original state. I find a can of tuna, and some crackers. We eat them sitting on the floor, and the appeal of the kitchen dissolves. It’s the same old kitchen, perfectly-fixed in place, but that is all it is.

Before she leaves again, she has one last thing for me: a gift. It’s from him.

“He told me this would remind you of him,” she says, handing me the paper bag. It’s light, but not weightless – not like a feather, or empty air. I reach inside the bag, clasping the contents in my hand. It was always a delivery, and for her to check up on me.

Inside the paper bag is a figurine, a small green-hatted gnome, clutching a pitchfork in its right hand. It has a grin from ear to ear, the gnome. She hadn’t shattered it, or even chipped it – it almost looks new; polished. I know the best place for it. On the benchtop, closest to the invisible fourth wall. That way he’ll know where to find me. When he comes home for the holidays. I give her a hug, tell her thank you, and she tells me it means the world to know the little green gnome means something to me.

It means the world.

“I’ll be seeing you then,” she says, slinging the backpack over her shoulder. It’s like saying goodbye to a friend. She smirks, patting me on the shoulder.

I follow behind her as she reaches for the door handle. “Thank you,” I whisper, “for visiting me, Lily.” I wave her goodbye, watch her step outside the kitchen, and into the beyond out

there. She wears a cap now, adjusting it with her fingers, and looking at her I can't imagine her in a place like this. Once she said she was. Once we all were.

Being alone again in the kitchen is a certain kind of feeling. With cabinets, cupboards, benchtops, tiles, walls, it's almost complete. With me, walking it, pondering and wandering in it, it teeters on emptiness, because what is a kitchen without the smells, and the sounds, and steam and smoke. Most days I eat what I can slap together. I idle by the kettle, staring at its blackness – its bleakness. Michael and I, the day I was stranded here, were shopping for our new house. He joked I could be the wife, could do all the cooking and wait for him to come home in the evening; he'd smell the wafting aroma of lamb and rosemary. I told him we'd cook together.

I can faintly smell what rosemary smells like. Most days I think my sense of smell is fading. Most days I don't leave the kitchen.