

THE LIVES INSIDE

BY HEATHER PALMER

They rustle inside. They flit between rooms, moths for fire. They prickle my skin and decorate my insides to their liking. Let them.

The noise is constant. The beating of their hearts is deafening. A lifelong battering. As long as their life lasts.

Not long.

They love each other fiercely and it makes them throw things and scream. All of them screaming and setting their hearts on fire. Some of them, the little ones, the smart ones, have the sense to fear me. To look at my walls and shudder. Even awake enough to see my breath move their flimsy curtains is not awake enough.

When this family move in, I watch. I watch for a long time. They move like all the others while I let the sun shine in on them. Four of them bask in it and make chirruping noises and flutter round the house. The sun heats all of us.

Then, when the winter comes they huddle together at the hearth, keeping in from my corners. Slowly, I creak a slate in the roof crooked, exposing the void of the beams to the elements. I let the water seep in, cold ice water down my spine. It takes them a month to notice it. I hear them sniffing, trying to find the source of the smell. They search. They shout. They give up. All the while the water saturates the wooden beams, the plaster, the precious memories in the attic.

When I am ready, I let go of the ceiling and it cascades, the bathtub fills with heavy rubble and I let it fall into their warm den. I may as well have set a fire.

They scurry to separate rooms. The littlest one turns quiet. Suddenly, the house is full of people and mistrust. They bang on my walls, rip out wood and let the bitter winter air in.

The family do not put up lights when the neighbours do. They leave for a few days, the freedom from my oppressive cold a festive gift.

By the time they come back I have cracked the new plaster through.

The littlest one spends all of his time alone. He stares at the screen. Every so often I make a misclick and soon he is deep into terrible things. When the summer comes the boy is less little and less kind. He doesn't speak. The walls are fixed but what they protect is ruined.

The others gather to speak about the boy. They police what he sees and hears and says. They attempt to fix my damage. They try to make him sit with them again. He remains silent. He doesn't meet their gaze. I am already inside. Whispering to him.

The man begins to feel frustrated. Years of work in raising a version of himself, pencil pushing and polite, are lost. The boy is foreign to them all. The man shouts like he never has before. He gave all his patience to plasterers and painters and insurancemen in shiny trousers and he has none left for his only son.

The woman is desperate and begins cloying to every part of the boy. She tries to fill the void in him with interest and care and things. She forgets the girl, who spends her time beyond my reach, returning late only for nightmares. In her bedroom, I loosen a floorboard and she quickly fills it with secrets. She writes down every thought she has in a purge, again and again but there is always more venom.

The boy is sent home from school for fighting. He broke another boy's arm. He doesn't leave at all now. Stoney cold silence follows days of shouting. The girl stays away almost all the time. She can't sleep here anymore. She hears me whisper all the time. Her mother goes to the girl's room to be entirely still. She is there a long, long time. It's dark when she stands but she didn't notice the sun go down. The floorboard, looser now, creaks so loudly. She can't ignore it and pulls the diary out. She sits at the small desk and reads all of her daughter's thoughts. For the closeness of her favourite child, at first, but it turns toxic fast.

The boy in his room rocks back and forth, hands over his ears. He chants things he wouldn't know if not for me. The man locks himself in his office with a bottle of golden poison.

When the girl comes home the diary is flung at the wall behind her head. When it hits the wall, I crack the paint on the new plaster. The woman lets it all go, screaming. The daughter throws the book back. I topple a vase close-by. The girl sees it. She pauses, head cocked to the side, staring at the shards while the shouting goes on. She turns to look at the plaster.

Her soft, insistent voice cuts through her mother's screaming.

'There is something wrong with this house.'

Above their heads the boy holds the blade. He's used it on his own skin so many times, carving out intricate patterns, but he needs courage for the next step. His sister must go first. Downstairs the woman is still yelling memorised passages from the diary, the girl looking around frantically for evidence of me. She will not find it. I have had a lot of practice.

The father unlocks his office door and yells down at them. They take no notice so he stomps down to them, unsteady on his feet. The girl greets him.

‘There is something wrong with this house.’

She must go first. I silence all the stairs and boards and muffle the boy’s breathing. While they are all together is good. A tangy feast for me.

He stands at the door in a shadow of my making. The others are discussing the vase, the plaster, the roof. The girl describes her nightmares.

‘We’re all together and the house is talking about us. It wants our blood.’

The boy lurches forward, the knife out. *She must go first* is all he can hear or see or feel. *She must go first*. But the father moves like he should not be able to. Upstairs the bottle is almost empty but here he is, swift. The knife grazes the girl’s neck before the man collides with the boy. They crash down together. I did not expect what they felt to burn so bright still, after all the elements I put in its way.

The woman grabs her daughter up, a palm to her wound. The blood lifts the curtain for us all. It is delicious. But the family’s nerves are aflame. The mother pulls the daughter away. The father cradles his son close, the knife thrown to the corner. He holds the boy like he is having a fit, gentle and firm at once, whispering that everything will be okay, everything will be okay everything. The parents are staring at one another, speaking in a language I cannot hear, cannot intercept, cannot stop.

This will not do.

I spark the frayed wire in the kitchen. I let it all catch. The thick carpets, the new wood, the fresh paint. I burn the photos and paper on the fridge with fury.

I make it look like home.

The family are cowering, rooms from the door, huddled in that nest they built against the cold. It cannot protect them from the fire, from the smoke.

The father goes for the windows but they are locked. He throws a chair against the glass but it does not crack. I yawn my mouth open, waiting for boiled blood to fill it.

The man takes his wife in his arms and tells her everything he ever knew he should. She cries. The girl forgets to stem the blood from her neck and it blushes down her chest.

The boy stands. I bellow to him over the roar of the flames. He moves slowly, as though wading through water not smoke, to the corner. The knife. He takes it in his shaking hand and turns to his huddling family. The man pushes the woman behind him.

I shout and yell and the fire reaches up into the night sky, this hallowed hearth the only room left. But the boy takes a step past his mother, his father, his bleeding sister. He holds the knife high and brings it down onto the glass. It shatters into beads and blades and he stands back. I know he can hear me.

He watches the family scabble through the gap, desperate. I cut the glass razor sharp and take a libation from each of them.

The boy will do. He will be a meal enough for now.

He stands by the window, looking at the others cough and wheeze and claw for cold, bright air. The house begins to collapse, blood red sparks everywhere.

The boy is mine! He waits for the fire to cleanse him, to free him and to forgive him. But the girl reaches back through the hot, piercing glass and takes his hand, slick with blood.

She pulls at him and I pull the glass together, so it slices at both of them but that language is back, the one they speak with a glance and she keeps pulling and he pushes himself. An order I did not give. The glass rips through the intricate patterns I designed for his skin. When did he last have control over his own limbs? I feel his heart beat loud and frantic and he hears it too. Drunk on the rush, he presses through the glass against his weak skin and falls with his sister onto the cold wet grass. She holds him there, her hand on his sweat-drenched hair, pressed against her shoulder. Frantic hearts in unison and beyond my reach.

I lap up what I can of the blood and let the house burn. It has been centuries since one got away. It will cost me.

But in time they will build another home here and I will take the next people. Or I will stretch out over the town and choose a new one. There is no shortage of happy households to poison and bleed. All that blood rushing through weak-walled veins, battered by thick hearts. It will be centuries before another gets away.