

OBJECTIVE

This morning, for a moment, I was no more than an object. My first mistake, before it happened, was to shower without music. I thought it intrusive, and the pounding shower loud enough to protect me. Then, when the water fell into the plug I made a clatter stepping out of the bath, grabbing and gripping the towel-rail. In a houseful of half-strangers it seemed obnoxious, a selfish way to attract attention and break silence. There were no boundaries when it came to the time for showering. So long as it wasn't dark outside. I slept through most of the dark, on the promise that the light was better than anything for keeping me awake. Still, there was no reasonable time assigned to drying, naked, in a white-tiled bathroom with two doors. No one talked about it. I presumed they were either too busy or asleep. After the water, noise seemed less intrusive anyway, and the morning a safer place to stand in.

This morning all the towels hung white on the banisters. I took one without embarrassment, hooked it over the rail and ran the water. The first few seconds were unbearable, then the thudding was constant and dulled, and I passed time waiting for it to heat up. I took stock of everything: wet flannel, two toothbrushes, his razor laid on its side, the blade sliced with different shades of silver in the cold light. I thought of him asleep through one of the doors, and locked the other to feel safe. Locking his would be frightening for him if he awoke; he'd believe it was unnecessary, perhaps cruel. I wished for music, the sign of occupation, but I'd left the tracks paused in the other room. Already I was peeling off my clothes. I let them crumple on the floor, curling with the weight of evaporated water in the stitching. The mirrors fogged on all sides. There was a protectiveness about being unable to see myself. A comfort in the shape, the form of my body and little else. I admired the misted reflections, the featureless face and shapelessness: aspirations, potency. I drew my arms over my chest, the shower-curtain around the bath. Through the curtain, in the other room, he slept. It felt private underwater; there was no need to lock the second door.

I cleaned in an order: hair, body. My hair wafted sour-sweet apple, my body was meant to smell of a sea breeze, untouched by anything but salt and sun. It was new soap, foreign soap, and I scrubbed until I felt cleaned. Apples spun and tumbled from my shoulders; the hot steam lifted the scent of the untouched sea and swirled it into the window-glass. I breathed it in and, legs slightly apart near the tap, I noticed the red between them. I thanked the timing, the water washing it away, laughing with the relief of leaving no stains on a half-stranger's white sheets. When the beginning was finished, I switched off the water. The house plunged anew into dangerous quiet.

I reached for the curtain, felt unsure and let go. Then, sure, I pulled it back and stepped over the rim of the bathtub. There was an order, a pattern to the next part too. Towel-dry my hair,

pile it under the towel on my head, brush my teeth waiting for the towel to collapse. When two minutes was over, I dried the rest of me and retied the towel at my chest, running for my white door and privacy and solitude, and the freedom to play my own music as loud as it could beat. The risks were a rite of passage: Morning could be named and continue, when I was clean and knew that I had conquered silence. Morning could be mine without pressure or strain. I could walk through every room, back and forth and covered, free and accepting of what was acceptable. I could go on as I had in days before. Washed, unchallenged. Modest, unheard. I held my breath, embracing the desire.

This morning he caught me naked on the white tiles.

It was no more than a moment, but it didn't leave his mind. It was my mistake, facing the unlocked door and making myself open to him. I asked him to forget, and he promised to scrape the image of my body: formed, imperfect, the impact unwanted. I thanked him, and under a white towel I found myself a temptation. Across the landing I kept the towel pinned, with both hands, over me, trailing to cover the tempting. Humiliated, I changed and folded it, wet with the blood on the inside of the fold. When he knocked I was dressed, concealed. He fell upon apologies. I let him kiss me. We stood; any position otherwise would have been uncomfortable. He touched me delicately, the way people caress and marvel at coloured glass. I think of the delicacy now and shiver. At first it was trembling disgust, then appreciation. Of him. Of our secrecy. The sensitivity between exposure and embarrassment.

I let him kiss me. We saved each other.

The same kiss became an unspoken promise. He never moved to hold me where I refused his touch. He never pressed me to lie down before his body. He didn't frighten me. I no longer scared myself.

This morning, for a moment, I was no more than an object. Then, the object shattered in a single action. He closed the door, gave me precious quiet, and anything seen became a memory, a thought, faded into nothing. I waited, released the breath meant for myself. Through the second door, unlocked and thin, we exchanged whispers. He heard my feet land on the white tiles, spattered with fresh water and fear unexplained. I examined myself in a mirror unblemished, safe and certain. It was fragile, soft as minutes after the birth, when a screaming child settles and the woman begins, slowly, to pull away from the pain. It felt like forgiveness. In those seconds we started again. We began something so new, so precious it hurt.

And the music – made for silence, for sanctuary – stopped.