

Chapel Arts 2022 Short Story Competition Winner – Vanessa Horn

Isolation

A chocolate bar wrapper cowers, creased and dismissed, on the hall floor. Ha! I'd felt uneasy ever since I'd woken this morning and – lo and behold – here is validation of my qualms. I prod the wrapper gingerly with my foot, hoping that it will exude its secrets: namely, who'd left it, and what they'd been doing here. However, nothing happens – the offending item continues to remain mute: a crumple of complicity.

I sigh, uncertain. Shall I go back home, or carry on with my twice-daily journey? Although I would instinctively prefer the safety of the former, the reason for my trip – specifically, an empty stomach and full bladder – gnaws unrelentingly. I need food. I need the public toilets. Stalemate. I have no option but to leave the building.

On my return, everything seems as it should be. In the entrance hall, at least. I hold my breath as I walk swiftly down the long corridor to my home. Then, sliding open the heavy iron doors, I gaze around, checking. My small square dwelling. Now doors ajar, the hall window spills a little light onto random nooks and crannies, creating a dreamy, soft ambience. I look down at the little table I fashioned out of a box, on it a saucer with the remains of a candle: my reading corner. Then the books themselves, piled next to it. Clothes; some folded, some hung over the one chair. And finally my kitchen area: a plate and mug ready waiting for when I bring home food. Everything is as it should be. I step in and shut the doors behind me. Exhale.

Yet I can't shake off my feelings of apprehension. I light the candle and pick up a novel, but concentration eludes me. I find myself listening out. Waiting.

Moments later, I hear noises. A small *thud*, then footsteps. I snuff out the candle, my heart thumping in fierce competition with the ever-nearing

footfalls. Shall I just sit it out and hope I'm not discovered, or make a run for it?

I hesitate until I realise the footsteps are now close. Too close. A surge of panic overwhelms me and I shrink back down into my bedding. Close my eyes, inwardly pleading.

Voices. Men's' voices. Initially indistinct, then clearer as they approach. "...demolition shortly."

Demolition? I shiver, suddenly cold. Clammy.

A slightly brusquer tone now. "Yep. Get the new flats up and... boom. Nice little earner."

A laugh and then an exclamation by the first man. "Hey, Pete; there's one of those huge old-fashioned lifts; let's have a look."

No! I cover my head with my arms and burrow even further down as I hear the doors slide open. *Keep still Betsy. Very still.*

Now, with no barrier between them and me, the voices are louder. Intrusive. "Bloody hell, Tone, someone's been living here – look at all the rubbish!"

Tony sounds dismissive. "Kids, I expect. Making a den for themselves. They've made a right mess, though."

Rubbish? Mess? My fear is fast turning into indignation: how dare they? "There's a hell of a lot here." Pete again. I shiver as his voice resonates in my direction. "Books: Dickens, Orwell... Not kid's stuff."

"Knitting, too," Tony adds, in a puzzled tone. "What the hell?"

"Squatters?"

“Maybe.” Tony sounds doubtful. “But why didn’t they take it all with them when they left?”

“Dunno... Wait.”

There’s a pause. Then a sudden flood of light as the fabrics are lifted, leaving me open to view. Exposed. *The game is up.*

I open my eyes. A burly middle-aged man is peering down at me. “They *haven’t* left,” murmurs Pete.

I don’t speak; I *can’t*. I just stare at him as he looks at me, our eyes locked together.

Eventually, Tony walks over. Breaks the spell. “A girl... in this squalor Who are you, love?”

Summoning all the dignity I can muster, I emerge from the covers. Hold my head high. “I’m not a *girl* – I happen to be twenty-two. And my name is Betsy.”

Pete takes a deep breath. “Well, Betsy, you can’t stay here, love; the whole lot’s coming down in a couple of weeks.”

I shake my head. “This is my home; I’m not going anywhere.”

Tony laughs but not unkindly. “You’ve got no choice — it’s happening.”

Again, I shake my head, this time more vehemently.

The two men exchange glances, then Pete clears his throat. “We could take you down to the Housing Association if you like – see if they can sort you out with temporary accommodation?”

I don’t bother replying. Instead, I grab my bedclothes and huddle back down. The conversation, from my side, at least, is over.

Tony snorts. "Great."

"It's ok; we'll get the authorities onto it," Pete mutters. Then he hunkers down to me. "Betsy, we're going now. If you don't want the powers-that-be on your case, you need to get out of here."

I ignore him, closing my eyes. I wait. After a few moments, I hear the walk away. Listen for the *thud* of the front door. Finally, I breathe out.

Alone. Back to normality. I emerge from the covers and gaze around my home – my refuge – expecting the usual contentment to wash over me. Awaiting the pleasure from being in my own space, surrounded by my own possessions. But, curiously, I feel nothing. Zilch. All I can think about is the men's expressions – their distaste, revulsion, even – in seeing my home. I shudder, realising that my residence is now soiled; defiled. No longer a haven of peace and serenity. Pete and Tony have ruined it for me. I sigh. Consider my options. Eventually, coming to a conclusion, I delve amongst the piles on the floor, locating my carrier bags. I start to pack up my belongings. No point in putting it off: it's time to go. Time to move on. Who knows, perhaps there'll be a pleasant spot down under the bridge for my new home. My new sanctuary.