SHORT STORY

Variations on Burglary at Tivoli Avenue

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"Morning Light" by Emma Knight

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1

…and the lovely roses, late yellow roses all leaning over the wall, giving the only bit of colour to the dark and dirty lane I walk. They are gorgeous, I think, and they surely smell like heaven, or as the path to heaven must smell. I want to smell them better, closer, fill my lungs with their scent. There's some ivy right next to them, poison ivy.

Don't touch it, I think, while grabbing the edge of the wall, pulling, breathing in, raising my nose. And that's when I see the open window.

No lights inside, no car outside, just the open window, so vulnerable, so inviting. This has always been my favourite house, I think, always looking so neat, so perfect and homey and white, as white as the clouds of heaven must be. And me always sleeping in the dark. And me…

And I jump. I leave my rucksack and sleeping bag on the ground, and I jump the fence. I don't think about the roses anymore. I think about the open window and what's behind — the warmth, the white. And I enter the house. No excuse, I know. It was raining outside, but no excuse. It was cold and dark, but there's no excuse. I enter the house. The guilt, the guilt I feel, and yet…

I fill my lungs, and it smells even better than the roses. It smells of a place I have only been in my dreams, and I take a step. But no, I think, I shouldn't. I'm dirty and wet. I shouldn't. But just a peek. I take off my boots. I don't want to stain the floor, the warm and lovely wooden floor, or anything else, because it all looks so pristine. I won't touch anything, I promise to myself, and I take another step.

It's a guest room, I guess. Impersonal, plain, and yet I could stay there. I could stay there forever. But I want to see what else there is. Careful with the open drawer, I think. Don't trip over. Open window. Open drawer. Closed door, surely. But no, for once I don't find a closed door. The door is open, and I enter the living room, and it's glorious, glorious, a scene from a painting painted with love. It's a home, I mean, full of things that make up a home. A blanket half-fallen from the couch's arm, the chairs not quite in their place, a couple of toys lying on the floor. Don't step on the rug, I think, with your dirty feet. I wish I had socks.

And what else? I enter a room, dark, too dark, and I switch on the light. Nobody will know, I think. I won't touch anything. But I've touched the switch, and now it's dirty like me, and that can't be. That would be really bad. I need to clean it, I think, but not with my hands like this. I find the bathroom and switch on another light, and then I can't take it anymore. The beauty is too much, it's all around me in shades of lilac and gentle touches of white. And it smells of lavender. The beauty and the towels and the soap, it all smells of lavender. And

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everything’s so clean that I fall on my knees and cry.

That’s when I decide to stay the night. It’s bad, I know, there’s no excuse, but I don’t want to sleep out again. At least for once. So I wash my hands. I wash them thoroughly, I rub them hard, and I let them hang over the sink, dripping drops of water for a little while. For a little while so I don’t use the towel too much. Just a little. Just enough.

The switches are clean now, and so are my hands. I sit on the bed and feel the softness on my palms. I feel a softness that I hadn’t felt since I was a child, and I’m about to lie down but then I think no, it’s too much. Look at the sheets, all crumpled now. It’s too much, I think, and I stand up. I smooth out the wrinkles, switch all the lights off, and leave the bedroom. Yes, the couch will be enough. The couch is all I need, so I sit on it, and it’s beautiful. I sit with my back straight, with my hands on my knees, trying not to touch much and staring at the giant, empty TV. And staring at the framed picture beside it. Staring at their lovely smiling faces. And I dream.

I dream I’m in my house, watching TV. I dream the kids are laughing behind, playing with their toys and lying on the rug. I dream there’s a smell of food coming from the kitchen, of dinner being cooked, maybe a warm, filling stew. And I dream somebody touches my hand. Yes, my hand and my knee. Somebody beside me.

I’m nervous, but I take some pills and I keep dreaming. It’s all a lie, I know, but I don’t care. I will be in trouble, I know, but I don’t care. My sleeping bag and my rucksack will be gone in the morning, and then I’ll have nothing, I know, but I don’t care. Because right now I have my dream, and I’m feeling sleepy. I look at the blanket, hesitating. I shouldn’t, I know, but I do. I pull it over me. And before I know, I’m lying on the couch. I could live there forever. I could be their pet. I’d be happy with that. Their dog… no, their cat. Yes, their cat, and have a soft cushion to sleep on every night. It’s terrible to say that. Nobody is anybody’s pet, I know. But I don’t care. I wouldn’t care if I were one. I close my eyes, and I dream I’m a cat.

‘Hey you! Get the hell out of there!’

Someone is shouting, and I’m being kicked on my back, being kicked hard. There is light, morning light, and my dream is gone with the stars. My dream is gone and will never come back. And all I can think is, someone please help me.

2

‘Mickey, I’m… I’m not sure about this.’

‘You’re not sure about what?’

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‘This whole thing! Just turn around, will you? I mean, it was a mistake. I shouldn’t have come. I shouldn’t—’

The car ran over a sleeping policeman and Noel hit the ceiling with his head. The exhaust let out a rain of sparks when it hit the road.

‘For Christ’s sake, Mickey.’

‘It’s a one-way lane, pal. I’m afraid turning back now would be… illegal,’ Mickey said, and then he laughed like a hyena. ‘Besides, we’re almost there anyway. It’s that house there.’

They approached a white house, surrounded by an overgrown garden. Mickey parked on the other side of the road and switched off the engine. Noel watched him putting his balaclava on and then looked away.

‘Shit, Mickey, I can’t do this. I couldn’t even steal a biscuit from the tin when I was a kid. I once tried, and my hands were shaking so badly that I broke it into pieces, and I couldn’t pick the crumbs up. I had to lick them off the floor, Mickey. Off the fecking floor! My mum found me licking them, and the dog was beside me, and the dog was getting most of them. I swear that dog got at least seventy per cent of—’

‘Shut up! You said you were going to do it, and now you are doing it. Is that clear?’ Mickey breathed out. Noel didn’t. ‘I’m counting on you, alright? I’ve been watching this house like a hawk, and it’s a safe place until tomorrow, so stop moaning. It’s an easy job. Once we move the stuff, you and your Sheila will go on the best holiday ever, alright? To Rome or to Spain or to the fucking moon. Isn’t that what you want? Yeah, that’s it. So take one of these and put your balaclava on now,’ said Mikey, throwing the balaclava at Noel’s face and shoving a small jar of tablets into his chest.

‘What’s this?’

‘Just take one of ’em and get out, you bloody chicken…’ Mickey said. He got out of the car and slammed the door shut.

Noel watched him walk towards the back of the car and disappear behind the heavy rain. Then he looked at the jar, but his hands were shaking, and he couldn’t read the label.

‘Fuck it,’ he said. He opened the jar and tried to get one of the tablets out, but Mickey hit the window to hurry him up and he jerked, sending a bunch of them to the floor. ‘Shit,’ he said. ‘Shit-shit-shit.’ He closed the jar, knelt down and started to pick up the tablets with his shaking hands, putting them in his mouth. ‘Just like with the fucking biscuit,’ he said. ‘I got a fecking slap on the face for that biscuit, for God’s sake.’

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Noel put his balaclava on while crossing the road, and by the time he reached the door Mickey was already fiddling with the lock. Noel stood behind him, stealing glances at the car, the street, the neighbours…

‘C’mon, Mickey,’ he said. ‘You said—’

‘Shut the fuck up. This fucker is a tough one, alright?’

‘Oh, Mickey. Don’t say that, please. This was supposed to be easy. This was—’ Noel said, but a sudden cramp in his stomach made him bend over, and he had to lean on the doorjamb. The bell rang. Somewhere, a dog started barking.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ said Mickey, slapping him in the face. ‘Are you stupid?’

‘Shit, Mickey. I don’t feel well,’ said Noel holding his belly. ‘My nerves are killing me, man. I need… Jesus. I need to take a shit pretty urgently.’

‘Then go and crap, for Christ’s sake,’ Mickey said, slapping him again and kicking him in the arse.

Noel ran to the side of the house, bending down and whining and mumbling that he knew he’d get slapped. He crouched beside a rose bush, and on the yellow petals that had started falling off, he discharged.

He pricked his hand when trying to take some leaves from the rosebush to clean himself, so he reached for an ivy-looking plant nearby. On turning, he saw the window.

‘Hey, Mickey,’ Noel whispered, but Mickey didn’t respond. ‘Mickey!’

Mickey appeared from around the corner of the house. ‘What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you want us to get caught or what?’

‘Mickey, the window,’ Noel said, pointing at a low window on the wall. ‘It’s open.’

Mickey looked at it and then at Noel, still crouching and holding the bunch of leaves in his hand.

‘Clean yourself, for God’s sake,’ he said, and he climbed in through the window.

‘Mickey, wait.’

Noel rubbed his behind with the ivy leaves and pulled his jeans up, and then followed Mickey head first.

It was dark inside, or so it seemed to Noel. Mickey had already left the bedroom and he could hear vague noises somewhere else in the house. He groped his way around but tripped over an open drawer and fell on the floor. Lying there, he became aware of a slight

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discomfort in his crotch and lower back. A sort of itch. Mickey's head appeared at the door.

'What the fuck are you doing there?'

'I tripped over,' Noel said, feeling the discomfort turn into a burning sensation. 'Where's the bathroom?' he asked, getting up.

Mickey didn't even reply, or if he did, Noel didn't hear him. He just disappeared in the darkness. Noel got up and stumbled across the house looking for Mickey, until he found him in a bedroom, searching through the drawers and cabinets. He went to the bathroom and turned on the light, but Mickey turned it off immediately afterwards without a word. Everything was very quiet. In the bathroom, he took off his balaclava, unbuttoned his jeans and pulled his pants down to his ankles, and he cleaned himself again with a lilac towel that faintly smelled of lavender. He thought that it was pretty, that Sheila would like it, and that he would take it with him, and then he saw the rash in the mirror, a stinging-red rash that ran down his lower back and got lost in his crotch. 'Shit,' he thought. There were livid spots all over the rash. 'I'd better wash myself.' So he stepped in the shower with his t-shirt still on.

Mickey came into the bathroom and pulled him out of the shower.

'What the fuck, Noel?' he said, and Noel noticed that Mickey's words were coming distant and muffled.

'I needed a shower,' he said.

'Get the fuck out,' Mickey said, pulling him out of the shower and the bathroom, half-naked and wet. 'Take the TV. We're leaving.'

Noel didn't protest. He didn't even consider the possibility of protesting. He staggered to the living room and saw the huge TV in front of the couch. 'That's got more inches in it than my living room,' he thought, and he laughed at his own joke. He tried to lift it, but he hadn't unplugged the cables and barely managed to leave it where it was without dropping it before stumbling backwards and falling on the couch. 'I'll stay here for a moment,' he thought, his eyelids feeling heavier. There was a photograph in a frame beside the TV, a man and a woman with two kids, having an ice cream on a sunny day. 'They sure are in Rome or something,' he thought. 'I'll take Sheila to Rome when I get my part. Yeah, Rome or Spain or…'

'Noel, what are you doing?'

Mickey was shaking him, slapping him again and again, but Noel couldn't feel a thing. He couldn't feel the slaps or the sting in his behind. He was in a state of bliss. He pulled a blanket that was hanging over the couch's arm and laid his head on a pillow, looking at the

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picture. He was in Rome or Spain or…

‘How many tablets did you take?’

‘I’n’t know. A few?’ he said.

‘Fuck!’ said Mickey. ‘Alright, you stay here. Don’t move, alright? I’ll take the TV to the car and then I’ll come back for you. Just wait here,’ he repeated. But Noel wasn’t going anywhere.

Mickey never came back, and the next morning Noel felt a slap on his face, just like his mother’s.

‘Wake up!’

A Garda was looking at him. Noel’s eyes opened wide, and he tried to say something, but his tongue didn’t respond. ‘Christ…’ he thought. ‘Someone please help me.’

3

I was drunk, all right. I had bought a bottle in an off-licence and drunk half of it, and then I had been drinking at Dermot’s until they closed. But what was I supposed to do? Sit by myself in that matchbox flat, watching rubbish on TV and talking to myself? At least at Dermot’s I can pretend I’m not talking to myself.

I walked all the way to the house, with the rain and all; that’s how drunk I was. By the time I got there, the bottle was empty and I was soaked. I don’t even know how long it took me, but probably half the night. Why did I go? The hell if I know. I was too stewed to reason. I suppose I wanted to see it again, that’s all. If you’d seen that grandiose entrance, those majestic bay windows, that magnificent door…

I went straight for the gate. I didn’t even stop to look at the house or to think about what I was doing. I just put my hand between the bars and half lifted the gate while pulling the bolt the way I used to, because the whole thing was rusty and slightly off the hinges, and you had to half lift it to open it. But it wasn’t rusty anymore. I stopped pulling and the bolt slid back and forth, smooth as silk, and then I realised they had changed the whole gate. That drove me insane. I don’t know why, but it did. Probably because I was drunk. I got so angry that I threw the bottle in my hand into old Jimmy’s garden, and his dog started barking. I never liked that old grump anyway. He was always telling Ronda how his roses were bigger and better than ours and crap like that.

I climbed the steps and started ringing their bell and banging the knocker. I hadn’t even noticed that there was no car and that they probably weren’t home, so I kept ringing and

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knocking and telling them to let me into my house. Then grumpy Jimmy's light went on, and I hid behind a wall. I knew he'd call the police if he saw me. He'd never liked me. Not many people did back then. And even less now.

That's when I saw the roses. I don't know. Not many people liked me back then, but Ronda did. Ronda loved me. She loved me almost as much as she loved her roses, and when I saw them, I… they were blooming and rich and full, and the scent… but it was all overgrown. The bastards had let everything overgrow and there was some poison ivy growing around the rosebush.

'Well, you can choke on it, you bastards. But I'm taking the roses,' I said. 'I'm taking the fucking roses!' And I started pulling bunches of them. I wasn't thinking about Jimmy anymore. I wasn't thinking about my last good suit, which was getting caught and ripped in the thorns, and I wasn't thinking about the rain or the newcomers or anything else. I was just plucking roses from that bush with my bare hands, feeling the pain but not caring at all. I wanted to get all of them. I wanted to take as much from that house as I could, because that house had been everything to me, my joy, my pride, my whole life.

Then I ran out of breath and leaned on the wall of the house, and my elbow went too far back. The window was open. They had left the window open, through which anyone could have entered. God, did I hate them. I didn't know them, but I hated their guts. I hated everyone.

I dropped the roses and climbed through the window into my study, which looked like a guest room now, with its bed and stupid bedside lockers. It was horrible. It was a humiliation, and I couldn't stop looking at it, full of spite. I tripped on a drawer they had let open, and… Christ... I pulled the drawer out and then flung it against the wall, scattering the contents all over the place. I did the same with the rest of the drawers, and by the time I had finished the room was a mess. My hands were hurting quite badly. They were covered in blood, I saw, probably from plucking the roses.

I went to the bathroom to wash them, but as soon as I opened the door and turned on the light, I saw all the lilac, and I almost threw up. Everything was fucking lilac and smelled of lavender, and I couldn't bear to look at it.

'Blue!' I shouted. 'The bathroom's fucking blue!' And I went berserk.

I pulled the towels from the bars and threw them on the bedroom floor; there, I flipped the bedside lockers and stripped the bed linen off and threw all there was to be thrown in all directions, and then I went back to the bathroom; I swept all the jars and toothbrushes and soap from the marble sink and punched the mirror, I pulled the shower curtain and the toilet

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seat, and I smashed the cistern lid against the wall. Then I slid on some water and almost fell, and I had to hold onto the sink for a moment.

The place was in complete chaos. I saw my cracked reflection in the mirror, I saw the remains of a man, and I looked at my bloody hands.

I had wrecked the tap, so I washed them in the toilet cistern, still panting, and while I did, I found a bottle of whiskey I used to hide there for visits of the in-laws and that sort of emergency. My whiskey. In my house.

I took the bottle and went to the living room, dragging my feet among the mess, and I slumped onto the couch. There was the TV, my TV, but bigger. They had to buy a bigger one, just to rub it in that they could and I couldn't anymore. How many evenings had I sat in that same place with Ronda and the kids, in front of that TV of ours, watching cartoons or a film or nothing much… There was a picture in a frame beside the TV. The newcomers. A man and his wife, and a couple of kids. They all looked happy. They looked like a family, and I smiled. And then I cried. I hadn't dared to admit it to myself, but it wasn't the house that I missed, and now, looking at that picture, I couldn't deny it any longer.

Just one mistake. Just one wrong move, and everything had gone to hell. Me included. I'll never forget that mistake. Lesson learned. But what for? I saw no future where to apply that or any other lesson. 'I'm finished,' I thought. I lay on the couch, pulled a blanket over me and stared at that picture, crying like I had never cried. 'I'm finished…'

And I fell asleep as a sad old man, as the leftovers of a happier time.

'Hey. Who… Who are you?'

Someone was shaking my shoulder. I opened my eyes and saw the morning light, but I didn't look at whoever was talking to me. I just stared past everything, not talking, not moving, only thinking, 'Someone please help me.'

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