

Molly Bloom at University

Six rooms, four boys. Six rooms with grey walls. Four boys in sweatpants. Four boys and two girls and I'm one of those girls but not the other, because the other is a young woman named Anna who has green hair and works the nightshift at KFC. I can sit my room and listen to the boys playing GTA in the kitchen, and I can sit in my room and listen to Anna upstairs, walking from her desk to the sink. We all have one desk (laminated wood) and one sink (naked porcelain), and we all have one bed, but my bed sinks towards the middle and I didn't bring any under sheets, but I'm too proud to tell Mum that I haven't packed enough, and I don't want to leave the room (Room 6 out of 6) because there're four boys' downstairs and one girl upstairs and I'm afraid they'll hear me. I hear them too, but each sound is unapologetic because they've lived here since the first term and I'm my final year, but I am bare and stumbling and they walk on solid ground. If I go to the kitchen, I'll expire.

Downstairs, the kitchen is Sunset Boulevard. Everyone is star-studded. Black, white, and grey. Idols. Each housemate has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. And I walk across the landing with nails in my shoes. Everything aches. The blue carpet drowns itself. It's a new carpet and a blue carpet and it's a deep blue, like the ocean, but wilder. The carpet is the colour of mouthwash and I'm sure if I got on my knees and licked it, I'd taste spearmint and elderflower. On the mouthwash carpet, I hear movement from the kitchen, and I have five heart attacks in quick succession before returning to my room with the same mouthwash carpet. My room with a double bed and empty shelves because I'm frightened that my books will send them crashing. I haven't brought enough books anyway and an empty shelf is better than a half-filled one. My books are yellow, creased paperbacks. All cracked spines and folded corners. I'm convinced they were previously owned by chiropractors. I have copies of *The Secret History*, *Sherlock Holmes*, Kate Atkinson, and there's *Moby Dick* (which I'll never read) and *Moby Dick* will never read me. Above the books and the shelves, there's a

corkboard without pins. I didn't bring any pins for this corkboard, and I refuse to ask our landlord, who wears flat caps and riding boots and owns seventeen houses while I will never own one. There's a text from my landlord who wears flat caps, on my desk below the empty shelves. I think about reading it as I change into a ratty jumper spotted with zodiac symbols. The jumper stretches; it pockets my skin like a secret, and I wish I could keep myself secret for the rest of my degree, but I blurt, and shout and I've already told one of my housemates about the mole on my back and why my father doesn't love me. My father doesn't love me, and I stare at my body because that's one of the reasons. And my body is stuffed into pyjamas which don't fit and I'm still wearing a bra, though it's decorative; there's so little support it might as well be a glorified sock. I think about telling Mum all this, but my phone is charging, and I haven't checked how thin the walls are and if my housemates will hear me cry. And I shouldn't text Mum otherwise she'll get messages every two weeks asking whether a *Rolling Stones* T-Shirt belongs in a darks wash or a coloureds wash and then another text five minutes later saying, don't worry I've figured it out when of course I haven't, and the clothes will remain unwashed. Unwashed clothes means Amazon. I sit with Amazon on my chest, propped against a stained pillow. The pillow is stained with coffee, splotches shaped like the real Amazon. The pillow is flat - I can feel the headboard beneath it - but I curl my neck to scroll. I order skinny fit jeans. I order scented candles I can't light in case I set fire to the house and lose my £600 pound deposit. I order crayons, tattoo sleeves, silver-plated earrings. I send them to the wrong address. Then I change the address and order perfume bottles, wax figurines, handmade bookmarks, neon dreamcatchers, men's underwear. I eat crisps on my lap whilst buying things I'll never use. I watch romantic films on mute because I want to check if I'm broken and strange and malformed, or frigid as Sam called me when I told him no. I tell Sam he's wrong as I stare at the ceiling and try to masturbate, with little success. I unlock the door, hoping one of my housemates will walk in

and say, oh look, there's a cool girl, there's a girl who knows what she's doing, there's girl like the ones I masturbate to. And even if Project Masturbation is a success, the aftermath will bulge with shame and guilt because I'm alone, because I'm doing this for myself, and there is no one else and it's just me using my own body. My body makes me wish I were a man. My body makes me wish I were a man in tweed who smokes Italian cigars and drinks top-shelf bourbon, though I like neither of those things. I do like tweed. I like the idea of tweed. I see tweed and I picture the gun dog and game fairs Aunty Clare used to drag me to, where women toting riding crops would shoot clay pigeons and talk about horse racing. There's a racetrack near the university, but not near the house and yet I can hear soil churning. I can hear *The Pixies* downstairs. My housemates sing along. My housemates sing till they send Aaron to find me, and Aaron doesn't knock. He doesn't knock, but he wears leather jackets. He wears those jackets and say things like 'lit' and 'tight' which I'm sure taste different in his mouth. There are two beer cans in the pockets of his denim shirt. He looks so unassuming that I hate him.

You coming to the party, he asks.

Yeah. I go to parties all the time, I say. He laughs and rubs his stubbly chin.

It's nothing much, he says. Just a few of Luke's friends. You might know them. They're studying English as well.

I stand on the threshold; my door is open. My door is gaping. He can see inside. It's the same reason I never open the fridge if someone's looking, or my cupboard in the kitchen or the front door. Aaron shrugs.

You don't have to come, he says, but of course am I coming. I ask him what I should bring, and he says it's a house party, not a holiday. A house party just down the road, and we're on

the stairs now; the stairs are one large corkscrew. Luke is at the bottom of the stairs, a fag tucked behind his ear. His ears are large, and kite shaped. Luke says I should bring beer.

Or vodka, he adds. Vodka is good too. We'll stop at the shops on the way there. It's only a five-minute walk.

The five-minute walk takes place in the dark; the alien glare of the corner shop is oddly comforting. I am swept up in queues of people the university advertised as being like-minded. These like-minded people become fish in a tunnel. I am swept down this tunnel with my back pressed against the fridge. Against the fridge, which emits a Tim Burton glow, I am limited to grabbing whatever I see. I find two cans of gin and tonic and a rum and coke. The gin, the rum. I swipe a bag of sweets. I don't know what kind of sweets are in my hand because I'm pushed to the till and asked to produce my ID and the cashier doesn't seem to realise that it's a loaded question, asking someone for their ID. The man checking my ID has a muskrat moustache which wriggles; I'm sure he knows I'm the girl who once thought Wetherspoons was posh. I wouldn't sell alcohol to me either. The alcohol sloshes as I pass it over, and he scans each barcode, asks for ID again because I didn't give it to him the first time. The first sip, I take with the boys outside. The alcohol which sloshed around in its cans now sloshes around in my belly. I hold the cans like I'm holding mugs of hot chocolate—both hands clasped around the cylinders. I'm convinced Luke and Aaron will judge the brands I bought, the type of alcohol I'm drinking, when the reality is that they probably don't care, just like Anna probably doesn't care whether I cook bacon noodles or microwave a Shepherd's Pie. The road is burnt like that Shepherd's Pie as we walk to the house. The boys walk in tandem. I lag as they walk in tandem. They're walking together and I'm perpetually catching up. Catching up when they reach the house, which is a simple redbrick semi-detached near the Old Vic Pub. Near the pub, it's the kind of house that has eyes and lips, and an impossible nose, nostrils filled with cement. Those nostrils expand as the door opens, producing a lanky

Asian kid who introduces himself as Leo. Leo the lion with his freshly dyed hair; he carries a beer like it needs swaddling. Leo the lion roars to let us in. Aaron, Luke, and me—all are welcome.

Come on in, says Leo. I want to hide inside his mane. His mane ruffles as he raises his head, greeting Luke and Aaron with a hey, man, what's up, not bad, how you been, you got the stuff?

There's Leo, Luke, Aaron, and a crowd of us, packed into this cardboard living room. The living room isn't a living room. The living room is stasis and presence, where 18–25-year-old's mill about in a smoky haze, listening to *Queen*. Most are drunk. Most lie back with cat-like smiles—happy drunk. They are happy drunks, and I am barely drunk but sad drunk and tipsy drunk and wondering why I came. Wondering why I came whilst trying to remember the bands Aaron likes, the books Luke is studying. Luke is also studying a girl's body; she leans against the wall sipping rum. She's sipping rum with lips of clay, her neck caked with make-up.

Sit down, she says. You can fit four on that sofa.

Four people are already on that sofa, but I don't say this. Instead, I squeeze myself in the middle of the four, right between Aaron and some blonde man with an inexplicably ginger beard. Ginger beard and legs spread, wearing a white shirt and a crucifix. The metal jangles as he sits up, turns to me, asks me if I'm here with anyone even though he's just seen me come in. We've just come in, but Luke is dancing. Luke is dancing with this girl he's been studying, hands in his pockets. Not dancing then. I'm not sure how you can dance with your hands in your pockets, not without falling over. If he falls, I'm sure he'll bounce straight back up. Continue dancing. I want to ask someone to dance, but I wonder if someone's cock will shrivel because I'm a girl and I'm asking them when they feel they should be asking me. But

no one will ask me and besides, Luke's not dancing anymore. Instead of dancing, his tipping cocaine onto the coffee table. The coffee table is glass. The glass coffee table is now repurposed; it's modern art. Gather round. As Luke draws lines with the white powder, I want to ask where he got it, wondering who'd make deals with a twenty-something Literature student who reads Proust for fun and wears an alarming range of *Led Zeppelin* T-Shirts. For some reason, I think drug dealers do lots of research on their clients. And Luke is one of their clients and he's snorting the stuff while I chat with Aaron about whether T.S. Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent* is pedestrian.

I leave the party early. I leave the party; it's early enough that cars are circling the roads. I follow the streetlights, which hang like apples pumped full of preservatives. I follow the apple-lights and I think about calling Mum, who will be in bed anyway, so there's no point calling her at all. I follow the lights and don't call anyone. There's no one to call when I reach the house—everyone is asleep or out at a different party, so I prepare for tomorrow's workshop, reading endless journal articles which mansplain how a passage from Hope Mirreles's *Paris* represents her fear of vaginas, but I stop reading half-way through because a poem is a poem is a poem.

A poem is a poem, and I am a poem. One of those half-formed modernist poems, all fragments. Bits of bad grammar, caps lock, typography which makes no sense. I'm supposed to be all new-age and sexy, but I'm a strange half-formed thing. A half-formed thing lying in bed listening to Playlists to Cry to at 2am though it's neither 2am nor am I crying. I am not crying but listening or trying not to listen as Anna fucks Luke in the upstairs bathroom. She cries out a few times and I wonder what it's like—to make such noise with abandon. When they abandon their abandon and return to their rooms, I stick my head out the door. Listen to the silence. Breathe in before it's trampled by Aaron on the stairs. I duck back into the room, clutching my bladder. My bladder isn't the issue here: I haven't shit in days. Not in the house,

never in the house have I taken a shit. If I feel the need, I'll walk twenty minutes to campus and pick a disabled loo where I can sit heaving for as long as I like without fear of interruption. Fearful of interruptions, my arsehole has become shy. And my bones strain, skin bulging as I realise I'm holding myself hostage. In this house with the rent and the four boys and one girl and me, taking myself prisoner for £628 a month.

I lock the door and decide I'll shit tomorrow, because tomorrow I need to wash my hair and one of the bathrooms has a shower and a toilet, so I'll run the shower while I shit and mute the sound of being human. The sound of cracking as I climb into bed, brushing crumbs onto the carpet. The carpet is too bright. Too bright and I want to switch the lights off but I'm already in bed. In bed, I'm telling myself that I'm still writing, and I've done all my reading for the following week. I haven't missed one seminar, I went to party where a 23-year-old man pissed out the window. I didn't dance, but I drank. Drinking with the housemates, who are downstairs watching *The Social Network* and laughing because Michael Cera is perfect casting. It's all perfect because they're downstairs and I can go to the loo, and I can be alone and bask in the thought that I am alone, and they are downstairs.

And then I watch a film about young love, where two perfect specimens hold each other and become a single shape. I start to cry, so that's something.