

Every Room, Every Wall

Sally just had to go to this bookstore. Out of all the bookstores in town - and there were four of them, and one was a big retailer with two floors and a cafe - she chose this one, the smallest and the dingiest, a room of mazy, over-stacked shelves and clumsy piles set in random towers about the floor. Anyone could see that this was the worst bookstore out of the available options. Anyone - a blind person, a child. Anyone.

Sally was tottering by the shop's entrance. "I just want to browse," she said, to nobody in particular. It was late afternoon on a Saturday; the sun was waning, and most people had decided that now was a good time to head home. And here was Dan, rooted to the pavement, watching the sparse scattering of people as they moved and faded on the highstreet. He looked back at Sally, at her pleading face, and at the deceit buried somewhere inside of it. Because he knew that Sally didn't want to just browse. Sally, of course, wanted to bump into the poet.

"I'll wait out here," he said, looking out onto the road.

Sally's eyebrows dropped. "Daniel," she said.

"We have enough books, don't we?" he said, turning to face his wife. She was a narrow-shouldered woman with a lithe, delicate build and an inquisitive sort of face. Her hair was a mature blonde, and though the first sprouting of wrinkles had recently etched themselves on her face, they were mostly shallow and subtle. Even now, up this close, Dan couldn't see them; under the bathing glow of a soft afternoon sun, Sally looked almost androgynous.

"I just want to have a look," she said. "Maybe get something for Maria. She's entering another competition." Maria was their fourteen-year-old daughter, their only child.

Sally puckered her lips as if to say something more, but retracted the breath.

"I've got to get this shopping in the car," he said. He panted a little, as if to indicate the physical strain of such a task. He was holding two bags, each as light as pillows.

She didn't say anything. She just stood there, her narrow eyes looking suspiciously over his face and body, like a helicopter searchlight. Then she spoke. She had been planning her words carefully in her head. "We've been shopping," she said. "And it's been hard. It's always an operation with you - efficient, get what we need. And that's fine." She leaned over and clasped his hand. Her hand was cold, like meat out of the refrigerator, but then he supposed so was his. He returned her grip and met her eyes. "But now," she said, "I want to have a little stroll, in the bookshop, with you. It will be nice."

Dan held his gaze, then shrugged his shoulders and relented. What choice, really, did he have? What plausible excuse for not entering and lingering inside this tiny bookshop? Later, he knew, he would come up with a dozen good reasons he could have deployed, but this would be as good as collating expired coupons. For now, there was nothing: no words, or at least no good ones. He followed his wife inside. The door made its terrible chime.

Relief coursed through him when he saw who was working behind the counter. She was a tiny elderly lady in a blue cardigan, and she had that funny way of wearing her glasses way down on the tip of her nose. She gave them a warm, almost fey smile when they came in, and then returned to whatever she was doing at the desk. Eileen - he was fairly certain that was her name. Luke had told him a bit about her. Her son had died in a motorbike accident about five years ago.

Dan followed his wife around the shop, his eyes roaming the clutter of shelves. This is where books come to die, he thought.

Sally stopped in front of a shelf labelled '19th c. Classics'. The label was a faded, handwritten scribble sellotaped to the old oak. Dan squinted. He wondered if it was Luke's handwriting. He imagined Luke in one of his loose shirts, leaning over and pressing the paper against the wood. He closed his eyes and clenched his fists. The shopping bag handles were damp with sweat.

A middle-aged man with hollow cheeks and serious eyes was hovering close by. He was the only other customer in the shop. When he walked past them, Sally said, "I just love the smell," and then looked at Dan. "Don't you?" Sally loved saying things like this around strangers. Trying to spark up some kind of spontaneous conversation. *This isn't a film*, Dan thought, gritting his teeth. The man darted his eyes awkwardly before turning his attention to a nearby shelf.

"Yeah, I do," Dan said. But he didn't like the old-book smell at all. It was like a bad parody of vanilla. Vanilla's cousin, wired-up to a hospital bed, reeking of death. He shuddered, and walked towards another shelf.

Then he heard a low, monstrous rumble from somewhere on the road. In a blur, a motorbike soared past the shop, like something propelled out of a rocket. Dan couldn't help it: his eyes darted towards Eileen, whose face had momentarily darkened.

Sally tutted. "No wonder they're always getting hurt," she said, and she said it so that everyone in the shop could hear. Dan grimaced. He could have hit her. He could have seriously thrown her into a bookshelf.

"Don't say that," he said, trying to keep his mouth as still as possible. His eyes stayed fixed on Eileen, who was looking down at her desk again.

"What's got *you* all worked up?" Sally said.

"Stop it," he said, shaking his head. He bent forwards to inspect a row of books, but his eyes were glazing over everything. He heard the serious man leaving the shop.

"You've been very funny today, Daniel," she said. And she said that quietly. They didn't say anything else to each other. Sally took her time picking out a handful of poetry books for Maria. When she was satisfied with her selections, she walked over to the counter, and Dan lingered aimlessly in the middle of the shop, thinking deeply. He had this feeling like big things were coming.

"I hate to see you two lovebirds arguing," Eileen said, as Sally placed the books down on the counter. A little intrusive, Dan thought. But then, he supposed, not totally out of line with what Luke had said about her.

"I'm not sure about lovebirds," Sally said, and then laughed. The laugh was louder than it ever was at home. Dan wandered to the door and looked out at what was now the creeping greyness of early evening.

"You're too young to be arguing," Eileen said. "And my shop has a strict no arguments policy."

"Young!" Sally said. "Is forty young? I'm not so sure." Her voice seemed to taper off.

"Don't you be silly now," Eileen said, bagging up the books. "You're still babies. That's £9.95, my love."

Dan heard Sally unzipping her purse. He exhaled deeply. Final hurdle now.

And then Sally said it. She simply could not resist. "Is Luke not working today, then?" she said.

Dan tried to calm himself. He took a deep breath. He knew it was wrong to get angry at her; she was, after all, blameless in all this. And if Luke was in today, Dan could always just bolt out of the door.

"He's just out back," Eileen said, and Dan knew then that he wasn't going anywhere. "Do you know him?"

"I do," Sally said, which of course was a ridiculous statement. If Sally knew anything about Luke - but Dan brushed off the thought. "I'd love a chat with him, if he's free."

"Oh, I'm sure he's free," Eileen said, hobbling towards the storeroom. "He was meant to be on the till now, anyway." She called out in mock anger. "Where are you, you little slacker?"

There was a long, pregnant silence. Dan was no longer looking out onto the road. He was looking at the doorway in which Eileen was standing. A hundred sensations

danced inside his body, and he could make sense of none. He felt he was being pulled in every direction.

Luke appeared in the doorway, wearing a voluminous white shirt with half of the top buttons unfastened. His chest was slight, and tanned lightly. He saw Sally and smiled. When he saw Dan, the smile went away. Their eyes stayed on each other. And, as embarrassing as it was, as soul-destroying and unexplainable, as foreign and mawkish and hell, even downright childish, Luke, in the dim, half-shadowed light of this drab old bookshop, appeared to Dan as something beyond angelic; someone essential and inevitable and utterly complete in ways that Dan could not even begin to understand, and in many ways did not want to.

Eileen slapped Luke's shoulder. "Right," she says. "I'm going to have a break. If you wouldn't mind seeing to this lady."

"Of course," Luke said, as Eileen slid past him. Her humming waned as she disappeared into the storeroom. Just the three of them, now.

"Sally," Luke said.

"Hey Luke," she said. "Have you met my husband?" Dan had walked over so that he was standing next to his wife. He supposed it would look more natural this way.

Dan held out his hand and introduced himself. Luke eyed him cautiously for a moment before obliging. Those scrutinising blue eyes, set in a slim, elfin face. Dan held the urge to scream.

"Nice to meet you," Luke said, keeping Dan's hand locked in his own. His eyes glimmered with something that didn't seem so friendly. Dan tried to work him out.

They hadn't seen each other in a couple of weeks - ok. So Dan had been busy. That was what he had said on the phone. *I'm too busy right now. I'm just too busy.*

They let go of each other, and Luke turned his attention to Sally. Dan found that he did not like this. But what could he do? Take Luke by the shoulders and push him to the wall and attack the smooth, candy skin on his neck and chest? Right there, in front of his wife? Nonsense thoughts. Stupid. Today was a good day to start shaking the whole mess off.

"It's Maria," Sally said. "She's entering another competition."

"That's great," Luke said. He ran a hand through the tousled black hair that lay over most of his forehead. "Does she want me to look over them? Like last time?"

"She would *love* that," Sally said. "But also, I've been thinking about something. You could do with some extra cash, couldn't you?"

This didn't sound good. This was new. Luke's eyes flashed towards Dan for a second, then back at Sally. "Of course," he said. "Anything I can get."

"When are you back at uni?" Sally said.

"October."

"Two months," she said, nodding. "How would you feel about coming over and giving Maria some masterclass sessions? Say, once a week?" Then Sally did one of her laughs, as if she, or indeed anyone, had said something amusing.

Dan felt himself vocalising, but no real words came out of his mouth. Only a strained, broken kind of moan. He took a heavy breath, and found that the vaguely

aquatic scent of Luke's perfume had now taken over the shop. It had been applied recently.

"Did you say something?" Sally said.

Dan shook his head, peering down at the rich grey carpet. Sally tutted - softly, but a tut nonetheless - and gave out a sigh. "This is what I mean," she said to Luke.

"This is what I was talking about on Tuesday. The man can't express himself."

Dan knew he should have felt slighted by that - that it was a vicious, unprecedented assault that his wife had just launched at him - but he was unable to summon any meaningful emotion. He searched his stomach for rage - even a pang would do - but found he was stagnant. He fixed his eyes on Luke's trainers, which were a scuffed and faded white. It was something Luke had been saying more recently, or at least words to that effect. That he had to be more open. That he needed to let it all come out, like a great spew of vomit - green and marriage-breaking.

Sally said, "Sorry, Luke." Then she whispered, "My husband," at him, as if that alone was somehow wholly informative.

"It's ok," Luke said. "I understand."

"He's so muted," she said. She was talking as if Dan wasn't there. Dan was suddenly convinced that this was all calculated, that she had wanted to humiliate him today, in front of her new friend. "Oh, to be with a poet! I want you to give Maria those lessons, Luke. I'll pay kindly. And I'll pay double if you give my husband some lessons as well."

Luke laughed awkwardly. The sound wrenched something deep inside Dan's gut. He thought back to the times that Luke had laughed like that - *exactly* like that, the sound purely his, utterly authentic - in the past few months. Luke resting on Dan's shoulder, his head rising and falling with the movement of his chest, the steady warmth of breath streaming against Dan's bare, ageing skin. Dan clenched his jaw and forced his eyes onto the young man.

Perhaps sensing Dan's intensity, Luke's eyes shifted from Sally to Dan, Dan to Sally. "I'll certainly think about it," he said. He giggled a little, the sound breathless, devoid of any real humour.

Dan remembered himself. He remembered that he needed to shake this whole thing off. He jerked his head, as if trying to stay awake, and shifted his attention away from Luke's face. He studied his wife in the grey dim of the bookshop. He said, "Are we sure we can afford that?" His mind seethed with the idea of Luke in his house, sitting on his chairs, breathing his presence into every room, every wall. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, the shopping bags lapping against his calves.

Sally gave him a look like he'd just insulted her. She craned her neck back, and jutted her chest like a pale, featherless peacock. "Just what is it with you, Daniel?" she said.

"I don't know what you mean," he said.

"You clearly have something against Maria's poetry. What do you have against poetry, Daniel?"

Dan balked at her. He was simply baffled by the conclusion that his wife had come to. He said, "I have nothing against poetry. What are you talking about?"

"It makes you uncomfortable," she said. "I can tell."

"I'm not uncomfortable," he said. He felt Luke staring at him.

"Oh, funny," she said. "That's funny." She turned back towards Luke. "This is what I mean. Have you ever met someone so inexpressive? He wasn't always like this, you know."

"Really?" Luke said, and there was something plaintive in his voice. Then he said, calmly, "I guess it's not really any of my business."

Dan glared at him. "No," he said. "It's not."

Sally gasped. "Don't talk to him like that," she said. She tilted her head, as if looking at her husband for the first time. "How dare you. How bloody dare you."

Dan and Luke were locked onto each other. Luke's eyes shimmered with a new, steely intransigence. Dan huffed. He shook the shopping bags like there was something inside them he was trying to wake up. "I'm going," he said. "It's been long enough."

"Not until you apologise for that," Sally said.

"I'm not apologising," Dan said.

"I wouldn't have expected you to," said Luke. His voice was measured, and though his eyes had taken on a dark, weary heaviness, his face was subdued, muted.

"Talking to Luke like that," Sally said. "The cheek of it. What's wrong with you? Just what in hell is wrong with you?"

“Have you ever considered,” Dan said, turning to her, “That maybe not everyone is your friend?” He stood looming over his wife, watched the shadows of evening as they crept onto her small, stunned face. “That maybe not everyone wants to talk to you, or hear what you have to say about things? That maybe you don’t know anyone, or anything, like you think you do?”

Her breathing was heavy. She fluttered her eyes away from him and squinted at a far-off bookshelf, as if searching for something on it that would let her undo her husband’s words. But Dan wasn’t finished. He said, to both of them, “How’s that for expressive?” He flung his bags onto the floor and kicked a stack of books. “How’s that for expressive, huh?”

Luke said, “I think you should leave.”

“But isn’t this what you wanted?” Dan said. He was aware, in a detached sort of way, that he was in something of a frenzy. “Isn’t this what you both wanted?”

Sally kept looking at the shelves, finding nothing.

“I don’t want this,” Luke said. A single tear rolled down his cheek. His eyes were wet, dazzling, bright with pain. Dan felt something twinge inside of him. He was suddenly shocked with himself. He looked down at his hands and body as though they had been taken over by a foreign vessel. “I don’t want this at all,” Luke said again, his voice trembling.

The three of them stood there. A hazy greyness was filling up the room. Sally, Dan realised, was sobbing quietly. And to think she had only seen a glimpse. She had only seen a glimpse of how things were.

Somewhere far away, a motorbike engine hummed. Dan wondered what would happen if the bike were to come soaring past. He wondered if his wife would be silent.

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