

A Bruise the Size and Shape of a Door Handle

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When Salma was nine her mother died and she went to live with the father she knew only through birthday phone calls and from her mother's steel-lined phraseology—he was a bitch on heat; a fucking rabid, no-cock-and-balled pug with more horn than a wolfhound.

They stood in the hallway and looked at one another.

Pick a room, any room, he said.

She took the attic as if it were a birthright, carrying one suitcase up after the other. Life was a making do and she stood on the bed and stretched to place both hands flat on the ceiling, leaving her prints in dust.

Until Salma turned thirteen the house was just a house. It was too big for the two of them, an up-and-down warren of rooms neither of them had the compulsion to fill. She did not have friends to invite round, did not like those girls at school, their careful observations of one another, the way they moved and talked. Sometimes she wondered why her father did not bring back dates, long-legged women filling the house with the smell of bacon and eggs, wearing her father's dressing gown and slippers, their thin lips purple from the cold. She liked to think it was because he could not imagine there being anybody other than her mother. She liked to think he thought of her by the minute, her dark hair wrapped around his fist, her angry words in the crevices of his mouth.

Sometimes she dreamt of doors eyeing out from walls, stairs descending in quiet conversation towards the floor. Sometimes all the cupboards in the kitchen were open.

What do you want? her father said, coming in from the garden with the smell of cigarettes on his fingers. Why are you playing up? He went round the kitchen and closed the cupboard doors one by one.

She shrugged, not knowing quite why she was lying but doing it all the same.

I was looking for cereal.

Give a house half a chance and it'll answer back. Salma got her period in year eight English class. Excused herself. Folded a line of toilet paper into her underwear and ran home across the field, along the road, down the canal. She imagined the blood flooding across her, darkening her grey skirt, climbing her torso to murder the white of her shirt, soaking her cheeks.

The house felt her coming. Before Salma was halfway there—worrying about how she was going to wash her underwear without her father seeing—the house churned from top to bottom, ached

across its spine, made a sound that could almost have been: I. I. I. At his desk Salma's father looked up, shook his head, and went back to work.

She took to catching the bus out to the city. If she left at lunchtime she could catch the afternoon film and nobody seemed to notice her missing lessons. Her brain had been almost quiet before, occasional half-formed thoughts that gave her little or no trouble. She could feel something at the back now, working the way a scarab beetle must do.

That year was the year January Hargrave directed her fifth film. They were not on Film4 or the BBC, only late on the channels no one else watched; they kept Salma awake and came to her often when she hadn't meant to think of them. January Hargrave did not do interviews; was the first woman to win the Grace Heart award and was filmed, at the after-party, saying that if men fucked one another every time they were angry there'd be so much less shit in the world. Salma watched the trailer for the new film enough times to know it would be a length of air against the dull iron of living.

She went alone and sat at the back so she could watch who came in. There were girls who were, like her, alone but old enough to come with a glass of wine or a bottle of beer. They sat with their shoes off and their feet up on the chairs in front. They did not read while they waited or look at their phones, only sat and drank, and she wished she knew them or was them.

There were no trailers and when the lights went down someone who smelt of perfume came in loudly and pushed past her legs and sat down a couple of seats away. At the end of the film the girl was standing, an empty beer bottle in each hand. Salma brought her knees up to her chest but the girl just looked at her and after a bit Salma got up and they went out together as if they were friends.

In the lobby they sized one another up. Looked each other up and down, feet to breast, ignoring the face, as if the face was only a thing that had fallen accidentally onto what was really important. Bodies were what mattered.

The girl's hands were flat and wide and she wore heavy rings on almost every finger. Salma had never wanted to bend at the waist and take someone's fingers into her mouth before.

Her name was Margot and the next night they came to see the film again, sat holding tubs of popcorn they did not eat.

I don't care if it's porn for the middle classes, Margot said.

No, said Salma.

Or if only the art cinemas will put it on, and only twice.

Salma shook her head.

It's the truest thing I've ever seen, Margot said entirely without irony and with a knowledge

Salma wished she had.

They caught the train back together and at the Fox and Hound Margot knew the pregnant woman behind the bar by name. In the pub Margot said a lot of things about the underground film industry and actresses and then she stopped.

I like cocks, she said, but I'm trying to be bisexual, even if it doesn't take. I think, in this day and age, it's wrong to be straight.

Salma sat there and thought that there must be moments which were the beginnings of ends; that life must be a line of train carriages and she had just reached the jerk at the end of the first one.

As they walked away from the pub Margot took Salma's hand with cold and sincere authority. Salma looked at her hand vanishing into Margot's and thought about the scene in the Hargrave film *Hooking Up* where Matilda Padel invited her friends round to her apartment in Paris to show them the bed she'd had sex in—and she imagined a stretch of rumpled sheets, the imprint of walking hands and feet pressed onto the clean.

They were at the house. She did not think it was a good idea for Margot to go in with her and told her so.

You not sneaked in before? Margot said, eyeing the tall stretch of dirty white with suspicion.

No.

It doesn't matter, Margot said. Let's take the front door. It means we are unashamed of everything we do.

They went up the stairs on the balls of their feet, arms waving for balance. Outside her father's bedroom she put her hand over Margot's mouth, felt her forefinger slip between the wide, uneven lips. The house dreamt what they would do before they did it.

In the morning Salma woke to hands moving across her. She opened her eyes. Behind Margot's rounded shoulder the house had come in close to watch, walls straining, the breach of effort shaking the bed. Margot was busy with a sort of fierce intent, did not notice. Salma closed her eyes.

When it was done Salma lay and thought the house must feel the way she did; that nothing had ever happened this way and nothing ever would again. She was certain she could feel the pressure of it in her hands, a brilliant pulse in her belly.

Weeks went by. She had bite marks on her neck and on her knuckles and on her feet and around each nipple. She saw Margot most days. Hours were swallowed whole, gulleeted smooth. Any time Margot was not there she spent in the bath; water hot enough to burn her clean, windows clammed shut around her.

You'll rot away if you stay in there, her father shouted through the door, banging on the wood.

She did not care. Every sound was the sound of Margot's bare feet, shoes tucked into the waistband of her trousers or held in her teeth, monkeying up the drainpipe.

Sometimes they talked about Hargrave films or lay and listened to the soundtracks or argued with strangers on fan sites. Mostly they took each other's clothes off. Margot said—a line Salma was certain was stolen—that it was a form of worshipping. And, yes, there was something church-like in the risen struts of Margot's body, the flesh in between. Something, even, in the slow act of it, secretive enough perhaps it was a thing you would only ever talk about in a confessional.

Salma had read books where couples kissed, spoke in platitudes or come-ons; something about to happen, hinted at. Beyond that there was always only a white space on the page. A gap between paragraphs. She had thought often about what went on there. On the other side, when the letters appeared once more, couples smoked or drank tea or dressed one another or themselves. If there was a book to be written about Margot it should be blank; it would be those sex spaces between lines, sucked clean of words.

Salma wanted, more and more, to tell someone about Margot. Something had happened and it changed the way the fields looked and the way she moved at school. She imagined, on the fen, the flood water was starting to rise back across the flats so it could hear her confess. She felt the heavy words pressing at her mouth—at the till in shops when asked if she needed a bag; at school when Ms Hasin asked them to run round the field. She wanted, one of those girls—even them—to stop her in the corridor and ask if she was 'seeing someone', if there was anyone she thought about more times a day than she thought about herself. She wanted one of them to push her against a locker or trip her going in or out a room and for her to rise up and tell them with pride about the girl she loved. To go up to her father's study and push the door open and stand triumphant.

She had to tell someone. The words scalded her insides. In the end there was only the house. She jammed her mouth close to cracks in the walls or pressed her lips at the openings of taps and whispered about the shape of Margot's feet or the sound of her rings as she washed her hands.

In response? Only silence. But in the morning she would wake with bruises shaped like curtain hooks, half-blind from the detonation of a light bulb into a tiny, pained sun. She would find wall chips in the lasagne, pick shards of glass from the soles of her feet in the morning, walk into suddenly closed doors, trip on the raised ridge of a step. It was a jealous answer.

This is what Margot did to you. At night the house felt it worst: the pipes in the walls gurning, the oven burning through and through the dark, the heat of everything else: radiators and kettles and the airing cupboard. It had seen her going silently, balanced, up the stairs, seen skin coming from beneath clothes.

The house did not love the way a dog would love, unthinking, beating back up after a cuff to the nose; or the way a child did, through lack of choice and necessity. It loved her darkly and greatly

and with a huge, gut-swallowing want that killed the hive of wasps that were building hard in the wall and cut the electricity for odd, silent hours: Salma's father humming tunelessly in the attic, torch in hand, fiddling with the fuse box. When the lights came back on, the radio and television and washing machine jerking into action, he raised his hands in mute applause, but it was not him who had done it.

The house did not have the human complication to worry that its love spun often into hate. Or to think that the shape of Margot beneath the blankets, or the rise of mosquito bites as if they were curses on her skin, was not her speaking back, not words or a signal, only an oblivious living.

Margot saw the house's love before Salma did.

Look, she said—look the bloody hell at this.

She yanked Salma's hand away from the book she was holding and pressed it, palm down, against the wall. They were in the attic; the wallpaper bellying down. Margot held her to the spot until Salma cried out and then let go. When she looked at her hand, the palm was red from the heat of the wall. She stepped back, out of reach, her hand wedged beneath her armpit.

Look. Margot was up close to the wall, fingers pressing until the heat became too much and then withdrawing. Returning with insistence, withdrawing.

Come on, Salma said, let's go downstairs.

What do you think it is? Margot dropped her hands and approached the spot with her mouth, tongue out to taste the heat flicker on the air.

Come on, Salma said.

Margot didn't reply.

That night Salma pulled the tool box out from under the sink and laid everything out on the kitchen table for the house to see. She carried the hammer down into the basement and set to against the soft walls. Fell asleep in a cloud of dust, dreamt of power tools. Woke up knowing there was no telling the house; it was not listening.

Pleading with Margot was something you built in layers, worked up with cups of tea and cake and fast-moving hands. She was nervous enough she burnt the bread she was toasting, put milk in Margot's earl grey, cried. Margot went into the sitting room with that hip-sway which told you she was going alone and didn't want to be followed. Salma wanted to tell her she would follow her everywhere, that she was so sick with Margot there was no room inside her for anything else.

She started again: made tea in the pot Margot said was retro, cut slices of cake thin, the way Margot liked them. She prepared her face outside the sitting-room door, went in backwards. Turned with the tray held out: surprise. The music was still on, loud enough to shake the mugs,

but Margot was not there. She left the tray on the floor and went looking. In the attic, throwing aside the lumpy duvet with a rush of hope. Tracked through the halls, listening. The house moaned a long, low note that Salma felt in her feet and in her teeth.

Margot's clothes were in a pile outside the bathroom door. In Hargrave films cowboy hats were left on door handles and this felt the same: a warning wink. She kicked them aside, walked in. She had never seen Margot naked from a distance before, the body out of tone: the sharp odd protrusions of hard pressing out from soft.

Margot did not look up. Her hands were moving, stroking away at the walls, at herself. The ceiling brushed the back of Salma's head as it pulsed; the walls were soft as egg whites. Margot's mouth was open like a claw. The wall ate up the window with the sound of a bubble breaking; shrank the sink into itself, caught handfuls of Salma's hair and pulled them tight as bungee ropes. Margot's left arm was swallowed to the elbow in something that once was wall and now was loose, flabby. With a dry gasp her legs vanished to the knee. Her right arm was taken at the shoulder. Salma was pushed backwards by the sucking walls, the force of them grubbing forward, filling Margot's mouth. Edged over stomach and breast and neck until Margot was gone.

It was done. The walls shrank back, the sink hardened, the window snapped open onto cold air.

You have to eat, her father said, you have to sleep, you have to get off that sofa and have a bath.

She could not see the logic in this. She dreamt up breakings: foundations gorged under the heft of yellow diggers, walls pulled from each side until torn, doors splintered under fallen pianos. She wished she could not see it: Margot's handprints rising on the skin of the doors; her voice coming from the open oven door, emerging from the taps. The house was filled to the rafters with the smell of what had happened. Her father popped all the windows and bought air fresheners for all the rooms but the smell stayed: rock salt.

Salma brought home boys she found in the pub, in through the attic window, pushing them backwards onto the floor. The house shifted around her like a wound. When the boys orgasmed she lifted her head to hear the sound the house made; a quick exhalation, dust rising in pillows. The house showed its displeasure: her feet bloody, the sound of the boys falling with a whoomph from the drainpipe. The television turned itself on at night and surfed till it found the films Margot had talked and talked about.

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Daisy Johnson was born in 1990 and currently lives in Oxford. Her short fiction has appeared in *Boston Review* and the *Warwick Review*, among others. In 2014, she was the recipient of the A. M. Heath Prize. This story is from her collection [Fen](#), available May 2 from Graywolf Press.