

Cube of Boxes

by G.E. Simons

No matter how solitary things got, there always seemed to be a calming syrup of silent music on the overhead telephone wires that spun out into a world of connections.

Maybe it was the mere human comfort of knowing that a thousand anonymous conversations were taking place, without the pressure to have the slightest emotional investment, or even passing interest, in any of them.

They bisected the concreted yard in front of the four storied, rent-controlled apartments. And buzzed a sonic thrum into the empty night, cluttered with seabirds, more than a hundred miles from the coast.

Larch House was a squarish, angular cube of boxes that were engineered for adequate living in. They had also been cost effectively positioned in a sterile nowhere to the east of the city, near a recently closed eye infirmary and opposite a recently opened metro-style supermarket.

This was a midlands psychogeography of surprisingly good, independent fast food outlets and mounds of building rubble, aging cars with brand new alloy wheels and occasional fistfights. A place where anonymous junctions bisected and empty retail units' caged windows were spattered with half decent but mainly profane graffiti.

You could not only hear, but feel the pulse of thundering traffic from a flyover that arced a quarter of a mile from the communal lobby of unpolished floors, multiple letterboxes and dehydrated ferns in various plaster pots.

Other than the glass double-doors that connected the concreted yard to the communal lobby, there was no natural light source. Three of the five strip lights that would have illuminated the murmur of shadows were also long out of order.

The doors opened via a personal code number that each resident punched into a keypad. It was screwed to the exterior wall and

sealed with a thin PVC skim that prevented the rain from getting into its circuits.

The dimmed half-light of the lobby blurred into inconsistent seams and flickers of fluorescent lighting elements. They were housed within tamper-proof domes at landing points and along the narrow expanses of corridor, perpetually illuminating human movement in the stairwells.

So at least darkness on the steps and beneath the tubular aluminum bannisters was very rare.

He was lying on the neutrally coloured sofa again. Having just walked to the window, straightened a pair of unbranded training shoes in the short hallway to the front door and then washed and re-washed cutlery.

The sofa, along with a small divan, assorted kitchen utensils and a clothing rail, made up the 'semi furnished' status that he had signed for, under the terms of a six-month tenancy agreement extension.

He spent many hours, as a lying liar in this box on the third floor of the cube. Where outlying digital television and radio phone-in shows merged the mid-morning into late afternoons before becoming dumb evenings. Then night after night hung waiting in the shadows.

In the small bedroom the radio was perpetually on at a low volume as well. So that after he turned off the television set, there was no silence to deal with or endure, between rising from the sofa and lying down on the bed.

He made the occasional meal of course. Simmering basics on the electric hob in the windowless kitchenette, using the cast iron cooking pot that she had always made the most amazing chickpea curry and butterbean stew in.

The tinned tomatoes he would heat in it now and add to pasta from a thin saucepan or the gentle warming through of tinned soup were a long way from that.

Tonight, as every night, he was distractedly waiting to hear her key turn in the lock and for the door to slowly open. Where it would

slice a heavenly, white triangle of redemptive corridor light onto the sticky linoleum of the kitchen floor.

What darkness now for obsessing about the evenness of yard gravel or shattered hand-painted teacups? Of allowing her glorious youth to kill the present and clean forgetting the mojitos in modish Brighton bars, before bathing together. Then talking into the dawn beneath the bluish plumes of cigarette smoke.

The flat slumbered in the aqueous crackle of the muted television set, and he searched for the words he would say to her. Tonguing occasionally at his glass of pungent tequila, poured from a bottle they had taken home to their beautiful Victorian terraced house, from a cheap seafood restaurant forever ago.

When this bottle was finished, there were no more in the white Formica lined cupboard. None that they had bought together anyway.

This was the last one.

Maybe they could watch a film later. He had bought a copy of *Persepolis* on DVD, remembering her enthusiasm for it, while reading a review on *The New Yorker* magazine's website. At the time he had largely ignored her and worried more about whether it was time to trim the forsythia hedge that enclosed the small cobbled courtyard in front of their house.

He downed the remaining tequila from the fingerprint-smearred glass, then splashed three more inches into it.

Tequila is distilled from the blue agave plant that grows dense and spiky in the parched, volcanic soil of the western Mexican highlands. It looks a little bit like an aloe vera plant and he thought he might tell her that as he poured her a glass from the bottle they had bought together over cheap whitebait.

He remembered that she had really liked an aloe vera plant and had placed it in a red, patterned clay pot on the kitchen windowsill. There it basked in daily sunlight and was also regularly watered from mugs at washing up time, so it really flourished, plump and green.

As he swallowed the last of the tequila, he was suddenly and hazily relieved that he had something in Persepolis and blue agave plants to talk to her about.

But after more than five years since her key had tuned in their Victorian lock and as she didn't even know where he lived now, it was unlikely that he would need to finalise a blueprint for conversation tonight.

Not that he ever thought in those terms.

In fact he still kept an almost perfectly ovular stone that they had found at the edge of a harvested cornfield, when they walked hand-in-hand on a crisply frosted New Year's Day morning just after the Millennium.

They had carried it back home and added it to a growing collection that also included seashells like shaves of oyster combed from Brighton beach and zesty pinecones from walking Welsh river trails in warm rain.

He kept it in case she asked where it was on the day that she came home.

Before falling into a colic sleep, he wondered just how their love used to look from the air.

He wondered that every night.

