

Lullaby

by Meakin Armstrong

We lived above an auto repair shop in that part of town where they kept the warehouses and strip joints. Every morning, we awoke to hammering and clanging. When they were painting a car, a fine mist wafted through the bathroom vent and turned our tub, toilet, and sink murky blue.

Nights, the glowing roof sign for the Players Club leaked through the bedroom curtains, orange and red. Below our kitchen window was a hidden alleyway where the strippers took their breaks. I watched them in that alley on Mondays and Fridays, when Myfanwy was at Pilates. I liked watching the topless strippers while they yawned, stretched, and spoke on their cell phones.

Myfanwy complained about the apartment whenever she got the chance: our place wasn't like what we could have had in London. In London, the flats were better. In London, people didn't live above auto-body shops. *In London... In London...*

If the apartment wasn't too cold or too hot, she blamed that mist coming through the vent. It was causing her to have coughing fits. It didn't matter she worked at a preschool—a place filled with viral kids.

One morning, she used a few prim phrases to break up with me. She had her suitcases packed by lunch. She was gone by dinner. Two weeks later, she emailed me a picture of herself sitting on a small brown couch. She had a pageboy haircut. I imagined tea cozies, doilies here and there.

I decided that if Myfanwy were to describe our apartment to her friends, she would be wrong: the walls would be newly painted and white, not yellow and peeling. If she said some piece of furniture

was in the living room, it would be somewhere else. I created a new conversation area, out of car seats. I ironed my shirts. I improved my posture, using her discarded yoga DVDs.

I considered inviting people over. I would have them sit on the car seats. They would drink wine from new glasses made of crystal. They'd eat cheese on bone china plates and listen to classical music—I had Schubert, a new CD.

Nights, I paced the apartment, looking for something to do. I straightened things and opened drawers, her old drawers, and then closed them shut. I had trouble falling asleep, so I duct-taped some cardboard over the bedroom window. It kept the room dark and it cut down on the red-and-orange strip-joint light still coming through the other windows.

There wasn't much to see from the bedroom, anyway: usually, it was just mountainous guys checking IDs or standing next to each other, waiting. Sometimes they did push-ups. Other times, one punched the other in the face.

I shifted in bed, not sleeping. At times, I was able to see Myfanwy's face as it might have looked when describing her time with me. I could hear her voice. *In America, they live rather like beasts. In America... In America...*

The cardboard fell off the window. Orange and red light shot across the bedroom walls. Below was the usual view: guys in front of the club, checking IDs. I watched them for an hour. I wondered what it was like to stand in front of a place like that, checking IDs. Those people must have just gotten used to it, though. People can get used to anything.

From the kitchen window, I could see a stripper in the alley, holding a baby over her shoulder. I wondered if women with silicone breasts

could nurse, but Wikipedia had no answer. With the lights off, I watched her, a woman in her late thirties. She was wearing a terrycloth bathrobe and I could see the outline of her naked breasts. She was singing something and I listened with my forehead against the windowpane. I could feel the cool glass, and even over the loud, too-loud music coming from the club, I knew it was a lullaby. I put my ear against the glass and listened.

