

## What is He Doing in There?

by Ivor John

In the quiet of the early hours, even the slightest noise was enough to wake her. As it was, so often now it seemed. She barely slept anyway, dozing sometimes. If she was lucky, she would glance at the alarm clock. A faint LED glow on the dressing table on the other side of the small room, and see that it was two hours since she had last checked. Two hours had thankfully slipped by, which she had been unconscious to. Otherwise, the night dragged, inexorably on until she could respectably get out of bed, seeming to be transgressive or abnormal by being up all night.

Tonight, apart from her spinning thoughts keeping her awake, it was a particularly hot night. The stuffy humid air making her feel that she couldn't breathe. Pulling at the thick rubber band on her left wrist, as she had been shown, it twanged against her arm with a slight sting. A trick she had been shown to distract her from now increasingly frequent panic attacks. It sometimes worked, otherwise she was likely to cut her arms again. Broken glass, a kitchen knife if she was lucky. Anything would do, the cutting and the sharp pain would distract her enough from her disturbing thoughts, intrusive ideas and vivid images which she could not prevent taking her over completely. If this happened, it could be an escalating spiral, as the horrors occupied her mind.

So, she was awake and even though he was trying to be quiet, she heard the man push the door to his flat gently closed. Generally he was not a considerate person. She found him rather aggressive. He smelt of damp and tobacco smoke and his hair, balding on top but long to his shoulders and greasy. She would avoid leaving her flat if she could hear he was in the hall, where he would sit on a kitchen chair he had taken out to smoke thin hand rolled cigarettes. He had put cling film over the smoke detectors to stop them from going off. If she had to go out, to catch a bus for example, or if the postman had buzzed her bell to deliver a parcel, she would walk past him quickly, avoiding eye contact and trying to ignore his comments directed at her.

He must not want anyone to hear him, as he pushed his door closed in the early hours. He walked, slowly, quietly down the narrow cluttered staircase. She would have heard the click if he had put the lights on. The man in flat five always kept his bike in the hallway, it was a bit of an obstacle course, even more so in the dark.

Why, she wondered was the man sneaking down the steps, in the dark? She heard the door open to the street, the increased noise must mean he had not closed it behind him.

Twanging frantically at the rubber band, she stopped to rummage in her bedside drawer for her Citalopram. She didn't want to put the light on. She didn't want to do anything which would attract attention, or reveal she had heard him.

Apart from the traffic noise, from the open door, it was quiet now. But her her anxiety had amplified her hearing, and she could hear the radio in room five, playing an all night music station.

'I want to know what love is, I want you to show me...'

It wasn't loud enough to stop her sleeping and she could hear gentle snoring above the sound of the radio. Hoping that the medication would stem her anxiety. She sat shaking in the semi silence. Sometimes, she would scream uncontrollably, which would inevitably attract his attention. If he were nearby anyway. What, could he be doing in the middle of the night, that he didn't want to be heard?

A few minutes later, she heard the front door pushed to. Damping down the ambient noise from the street. He obviously didn't think that he would be heard, two floors down. She could hear him breathing heavily as he came back up the stairs. Swearing under his breath every so often as he banged against the walls. A dragging noise as if struggling to get a heavy object up the staircase. She hadn't heard the light switch, but she dare not look out to check, in case he was on the landing and saw her.

Then she heard the object, being dragged across their landing, and his panting as he past her door. But he was trying to be quiet. His flat was opened as he bundled whatever it was inside and quietly closed the door behind him. There was a creaking, she imagined as he hauled it onto his bed. Then silence. Just the radio in flat 5.

'Just a small town, girl, living in a lonely world. She took the midnight train going anywhere...'