The Break-In

Laura Martz

There was scuffling down in the entryway. No one else lived in this house. The other upstairs room was unlet, and the landlord never used the ground-floor flat. She cherished the peace she'd found in Venice. But now, on this cool ripe early morning, it was being disrupted.

The door was an old wooden one, swollen with damp, warped by centuries. She loved the door, and the house, and having it to herself. It was quiet along the canal. She could hear water lapping, and footsteps tapping on stone, and birds chirping. And now, in the spring dawn, someone shuffling around downstairs.

She spent her days looking at paintings and frescoes. The immersive Italian language course she'd come for had been cancelled. With no more purpose to spending a summer in Venice, she'd decided to stay and look at the art. She lost herself among angels and suffering saints. Mary and Jesus tiptoeing on clouds, guarding a realm of fleshless peace. Mute, two-dimensional and beautiful. The churches smelled of wax and blackened wicks, incense and the dust of centuries. In the evenings, she came back to the silent house, read poetry in bed and went to sleep early.

But now someone had come in. She got up and tested the old iron latch on the door of her room: locked. But had she failed to secure the one downstairs?

Still as stone, she sat listening. But there was no more noise.

She unlatched her door and looked out. No one was in the stairwell, and the front door was closed.

Mostly she'd been taking good care in Venice. She'd made one mistake, but it was over. She'd met him by chance in a cellar bar, below water level, humid and rank. His face was round and angelic with a halo of curls. He'd peered at her. "I know you," he'd said.

"From university." It was true. He was an art historian now, in Venice for a new job. "Congratulations," she'd said. "Sounds like heaven." They'd laughed too much, talked too long, drunk too much wine. So quiet in class: who'd have thought he'd be a sinner?

They smashed themselves together against a damp underground wall. Her blood fluttered and kicked. She smelled the centuries of earth and water mingling. Later, they said goodbye beside a canal, its waters whispering against sleeping stone. She walked home with church bells ringing and birds singing in the blue dawn. In the morning, Venice's teeming anonymity returned: milling hordes, all from someplace else, melting away by sundown. She was alone again, the way she liked it. She had made no more mistakes since.

Now she sat on the double bed. *Letto matrimoniale*, the landlord from the cultural exchange centre had called it, without irony. The expanse of white sheet closest to the wall was cold. Every night it glowed empty and pure in the moonlight. She liked to think of it as moonlight, but it was really electric, from the lamp out the window. At night she lay on one side of the bed, listening to the gulls crying and remembering her old bed, far away. Half-empty now, and him lying next to an empty expanse.

But it was getting easier not to think of it, and overall she slept soundly, without dreaming.

Later the same morning, the noise came back. Scuffling by the door, and then footsteps tromping slowly up the stairs.

She sat motionless as the intruder reached the top and paused. A key turned in the lock of the door next to hers. The door creaked, and the person trudged into the room and set something down.

She frowned.

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She woke at the same time every day. She knew it was the same time because the soft damp air vibrated with the ringing of the church bells. Through the half-open window the breeze brought in the smell of water and dust and stone. But now, these past few days, there'd been the sound of footsteps in the house, and then the faint scent of coffee and cologne on the landing.

She watched out the window as a man walked away from the house, tap-tap-tap down the canalside stones. From the back she couldn't tell how old he was or anything else. Another foreigner from the cultural centre, maybe. She hoped he was here for solitude too.

She spent a lot of time sitting and thinking. Her mistake turned out to have been bigger than she'd thought. She was going to have to talk to someone. She needed to find a doctor who spoke English.

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That evening she was sitting by the window when the man came back. She recognised his cherub's face with a shock and drew back out of sight. After that she took even more care, leaving late in the mornings and spending evenings in the library.

But it was a matter of time. He'd ruptured her solitude. Inevitably they would meet on the landing, with their knowledge of each other's bodies. They would come to know each other's voices, habits, footfalls, schedules of light and dark.

She knew how oppressive it was, living with a person. She'd found herself unable to stand it any more. And so she'd escaped to this vaporous city, palazzi floating on sludge, inhabited by millions on millions of ghosts. Immaterial bodies that you passed through and that passed through you.

And now here was a body, unwelcome, in her previously empty space. Possibly even two.

She saw babies everywhere. Living babies, giggling in the sunlit squares outside the cathedrals, with fat arms and curls like the painted angels. The waters of the lagoon and the canals danced and gave off smells: fish spawning and dying and swimming. In the heat, her clothes clung to her skin.

One evening she heard the front door and went out to stand on the landing. He was hauling groceries up the stairs, and he looked up and saw her. He stopped a few steps below her, blinking.

"Hello," he said. He took the last few stairs quickly and set down his load at her feet. "Have you been here this whole time?"

"I never expected you to move in, you know," she said. "That was a joke," she added.

He laughed and pushed the curls away from his round face. "I'd have called you," he said. "I would have. If."

"It wasn't personal," she said. "I don't ever give out my number. Listen, can I ask you something? Do you know a doctor who speaks English?"

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The next morning on the landing he asked her to join him for coffee.

"I don't like coffee," she said.

He shrugged. "OK. Maybe something else, some other time."

"Maybe," she said.

But you get used to the idea of other bodies in your space, breaking your solitude. Perhaps that was the reason she put off going to the doctor, and then put it off some more. Weeks slipped by. Soon it would be too late.

Then one day it turned out there would be no need to see a doctor. She spent the rest of that day outside, sitting in a square, listening to the laughter of the babies and their mamas and grandmamas and the murmur of boats skimming down the canal.

The gold-and-blue days stretched out longer and longer. She started leaving the house early again. The ripe marine smell was getting stronger in the heat. She opened her windows and it swam its way inside.

One evening she saw him coming along the canal, his round cheeks flushed by the sun. And when she heard the front door creak, she went out on the landing to meet him. “How about that something else,” she said.

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