

Kate Vine

## Beautiful Things

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The first house is comically grim. There is mould in the corners of the ceiling; flies bounce from surface to surface of the narrow kitchen. We would become stuck, Tom and I, between the two grey counters, as I chop onions, as I reach for olive oil – he would need to squeeze past to get to the table. He sits as I cook, he talks to me. Sometimes, he does a crossword puzzle.

5 The estate agent stands in the hall, tapping at his phone. His shirt is too tight, his tie pushed high up his throat. Outside a cat wanders along the wall, its ginger tail darting this way and that. I wish I could see its eyes, if mischief lies behind them.

Tom hurries in. I see his optimism and I laugh.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he says, rotating his wrist until it gives a loud click.

10 “I wanted to like it.”

“This place has great potential. We couldn’t afford something this size if it wasn’t a bit” – he peers around and sniffs, – “shabby.”

“I wouldn’t mind shabby. This is worse.”

“Three bedrooms!”

15 “I’d rather have two. Two that don’t smell like that jug of egg whites I left in the fridge for a month.”

The agent comes through the door, his teeth shining.

“So?” he says. “What do you think?”

Tom suggests we walk home and I agree. He is sulking like a child but I decided long ago to find his moods endearing. I stretch out my fingers and stroke the air as we walk. It rained this morning, a cleansing  
20 of sorts. Water drips from car mirrors and lampposts.

“There’s this woman at work,” Tom says.

“Yeah?”

“She’s called Ashley. You’d like her, I think. I see her sketching sometimes at her desk – she does caricatures, you know, of people in the office. They’re really quite good.”

25 He clicks his wrist again and I notice his face is in a strange position. He squints.

“Has she done one of you?”

“No, actually,” he says. “She’s done one of most people, but she worried I wouldn’t get the joke. She thinks I’m too serious.”

“She’s observant.”

30 “Right.”

We turn onto Becker Street, where the path starts to curve upwards. The sun gleams at the end of the road and together we climb.

“But I like her,” he says. “Ashley.”

“That’s great.” I step to my left, dodging a puddle. “You need more friends at work.”

35 “No, I mean. I think I like her.”

We stop walking. For some reason, I think of raspberries, how I like to press them into the roof of my mouth. The juice bursts out and only then do I know whether they’re sweet or sour.

“You have feelings for her?” I say, as if they are only words, only raspberries, popping on my tongue.

“Yes.”

40 I turn away from him and stare again into the light. It burns my eyes, but I do not blink. All of a sudden, I long to be blind.

He sits at our own kitchen table and I wash potatoes in the sink. I want to be back at the house we saw this morning, because there I didn’t know the things I know now.

“What are we having?” he asks, as he often does, from that exact chair. Maybe today, its legs will  
45 crumble and collapse underneath him.

“Potatoes,” I say.

“With what?”

“You decide.”

I start to peel them, slowly, winding away their skins until they are fresh and raw.

50 “How are you feeling?” he says.

“I don’t know.”

“Are you upset?”

“I don’t know. Do we have any raspberries?”

His mouth widens then falls. “I think so. In the freezer?”

55 I go to look. There are frozen peas, a tub of vanilla ice cream, but no raspberries. Again, his optimism.

“I took time off work,” I say. “So we could look at houses.”

“I know. So did I.”

“Why did you let me do that?”

60 He lifts a little from his seat but then sits down again. “We needed more time. We couldn’t see all the houses at weekends.”

“But why are we still looking at houses,” I say, my throat tightening as if it’s trying to stem the flow of words, “if you are going to leave me?”

He does stand then and puts his two hands flat on the counter. “I’m not leaving you.”

“Then why did you tell me?”

65 “You know everything about me. I didn’t want there to be something you don’t know.”

I cannot look at him. It was easier to look straight into the sun.

70 It’s been Tom and I for five years. Over time, he has shifted, in shape and size. His body reacts quickly to all he does. He runs and it narrows, he eats and it grows large. Either way, I rest my head on his chest and he always smells the same. When he is away, I sleep on his side of the bed. I think to myself, sometimes, that there is a small piece inside of Tom and that is the piece I love. He can cut his hair, he can lose weight, he can open his eyes then close them tight. But as long as that piece is still there, my love will be too.

That night I do not rest my head on his chest. I’m scared he will smell differently.

75 The next house we see is described as a bungalow, even though it has rooms upstairs. I’m not sure how this makes me feel. I know it is a bungalow and I know it is not. I expect the estate agent to notice how altered we are today, to ask what’s wrong. But he doesn’t see a thing. There is stubble on his cheeks where yesterday it was smooth.

“It’s only a two bedroom, this one,” he says. “But the Master’s<sup>1</sup> got a great view.” He pulls back the living room curtain. “More of a garden too.”

80 I nod and head to the kitchen. This one is square, a round table at its centre. Tom and I could walk in a circle and my skin need never touch his. There are photos of twin girls pinned to the fridge, young girls, toddlers really. I didn’t want to have children until I met Tom; since then I’ve wanted one so badly. Something that was both me and him, yet neither of us.

I watch him exploring the garden. He bends down and fingers the gravel path. Tom likes to touch things, only then do they seem real. His hands know every inch of my body.

85 The agent taps the fridge and I jump. “You guys got kids?” he says.

“Not yet. We want to buy a house first.”

“Don’t wait too long, mind.”

He walks away and I wince. I don’t want to buy this house. But I don’t know what to do instead.

90 We don’t see any houses on Sunday. We need a day of rest. “I think the third one’s a good compromise,” Tom says. He has laid out all the house details across the kitchen table. The third house was tall and thin and reminded me of an oboe.

“We have to go back to work tomorrow,” I say, this time chopping carrots. The knife goes down hard and fast.

“Yeah.”

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<sup>1</sup> *the Master*: the master bedroom

95 “What are you going to do?”  
He stares, quite deliberately, at the table. “It’s up to you.”  
“What do you mean?”  
“Well, I’ve told you I’m not going to leave.”  
“You’ve also told me you have feelings for another woman.”  
100 He sighs. “Both things are true.”  
I clench my fingers around the knife. “What do you mean?”  
He gets up from the table. “I would like to see – ” He pauses, bites a loose piece of nail from his finger. “I  
would like to see what this thing is with Ashley.”  
“And she wants this too?”  
105 “I think so.”  
“And she knows about me?”  
“She does.”  
I put down the knife, try to look at the man I love and recognise what I see. I hate that she knew these  
things before I did.  
110 “So what are you suggesting?” I say, more loudly than I mean to. “You want both?”  
He comes over and puts his hands on my upper arms. His Adam’s apple bobs shyly in front of me. “I’m  
not going to leave you,” he says. “I think we can do this. I think we’re strong enough to give each other that  
freedom.”  
I step back from his hands and they fall.  
115 When I met Tom, I started making lists in my head. I didn’t want to forget a thing; I would lie in bed at  
night and take stock of it all. The first night I remembered that he studied woodwork at school and he  
would like his own workshop one day. After a few weeks, I knew that he liked plaice but couldn’t bear  
haddock – it makes him feel sick. I stored these things up; I went back and forth to make sure I would never  
forget.  
120 He thinks he knows everything about me. He talks about my memories like they’re his too. Together, we  
have made memories that are both of ours, yet I do wonder how they look in our minds. Do they look the  
same? Or do we remember differently?  
I didn’t used to wonder. I thought, between us, we knew it all. But we don’t know what to do when  
things change.  
125 We don’t know what to do when beautiful things die.  
At work, I thought I wouldn’t concentrate. I thought I would imagine Tom looking round his computer  
screen to catch Ashley’s eye. Would he send her a message? Would they meet at lunchtime?  
Instead, I catch up on my emails. I look at the proofs from last week’s shoot. I drink my coffee black with  
lots of sugar and I discuss colour schemes with my assistant. She asks about the house hunt.  
130 “Did you find a place?”  
“Not one we could agree on.”  
After work, I drive, and hit red lights again and again. I stop the car just outside our village and call the  
estate agent. He agrees to meet me in half an hour. I imagine him pushing up his tie and grabbing his keys.  
135 The final house is on a terraced street<sup>2</sup>. The owners moved out months ago and there is very little left  
inside. A forgotten photo frame. A candle on the windowsill.  
“I wasn’t sure you’d be interested in this one,” the agent says, flicking on the kitchen light. There are  
bags under his eyes and his lips are chapped. I try to understand his shape, the curve of his shoulders, his  
slim hips.  
“I wanted to see something different,” I say. This kitchen has no room for a table at all.  
140 “It needs a bit of work, sure,” he says. “But you guys seem up for a challenge.”  
“I didn’t want a challenge.”  
He has shaved again, leaving tiny nicks about his mouth. “What do you want?” he asks.

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<sup>2</sup> *terraced street*: a street with row houses

145 On the way home, I grip the steering wheel and remember the agent's hands gripping my thighs. His tongue tasted of menthol cigarettes and I'd leaned away, preferring his lips on my cheek, my shoulder blades. He was rougher than I'd imagined, and methodical.

I take a raspberry from the punnet on the passenger seat. It is soft and rather bitter; I hold it in my mouth as long as I can. I am sore between my legs.

Tom is in the kitchen when I get home. I hear spices sizzling and my mouth waters. I too now taste of cigarettes.

150 "Good day?" he asks. The room smells of cumin, of cinnamon. Tom doesn't like to cook.

"Fine," I say dropping my bags and sitting down at the table. I feel scraped out and empty. "How was yours?"

"Yeah it was good, actually," he says.

"Really?"

155 He turns to look at me and I see him again, the Tom that I know — the Tom that is mine alone. My stomach lurches.

"Yeah," he says. "I couldn't wait to come home. To you." He heads towards me and my legs start to quiver.

"What do you mean?"

160 "I mean — I think we're strong enough to make things work," he says. "The two of us."

He reaches my chair and puts his hand under my chin, lifting my gaze to meet his.

"What do you think?" His touch is like ice. He guides me to my feet and into his arms. "What do you think?"

165 There are raspberry seeds between my teeth. A ladder in my tights all the way up my thigh. Bruises blossoming on the small of my back.

"I think we should buy the shabby house," I say into his chest. The words come from nowhere and simmer between us.

"Really?"

"Yes," I say. "I think we can make it beautiful."

(2019)