

The Spaces In Between

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We have two home offices. Mine is in the spare bedroom, a laptop and files strewn across Rebecca's old homework desk. My legs barely fit under the scarred workspace, and I have to depress the swivelling chair to its lowest setting. Even then the lacquered wood presses against my thighs, a constant pressure that cuts off the circulation. Pins and needles speckle my feet, and I have to get up often and walk around the room.

The tapping of your keyboard echoes down the hall, the gentle touch of rain on a window distracts me from the numbers that fill my head. Noises do that now, interrupt what I'm doing. Things that used to bubble away in the background are more apparent, begging for attention. Birds sing in the garden. I never knew we had birds. The swish of a car through the wet street makes me look up, excited, expectant. Other people's travels have become an event in lockdown. What are they doing? Where are they going?

I ignore remnants of Spice Girls stickers on the desk while Zooming clients and management, and I spend inappropriate amounts of time framing myself in the camera, ensuring the background is suitable. The draught that comes in around the window surprises me. No wonder Rebecca had so many colds when she was at school.

We may be in lockdown, but reports pile up quickly. Folders totter on the edge of the desk, accumulate in tall and unsteady towers. It would be nice to be able to file some documents in the drawers, but they are packed with Rebecca's old school things. Everything wrapped in plastic supermarket bags that have gone brittle and are starting to disintegrate. Mostly school books, her name written in tiny letters on the covers. You were always on at her to take them away, get rid of them. You said you needed the space. I run my fingers over her name, the cardboard covers slightly embossed by the pressure of her pen.

Your office is in our bedroom. Sometimes we meet in the kitchen, although our meals seldom align. I joke that we should install a water cooler, but you don't laugh. I can hear the

creak of your chair down the silent hallway, the constant tinnitus of the computer and its relentless hum as it does whatever computers do to stay alive. There are gaps in the house where things should be, but I'm not sure what.

Sometimes I work late. The night's familiar quietness is now no different to the day. On the desk is a photo of the three of us. The holiday we took in Bali. We stand by a sweeping sea at dusk, crescent smiles like slivers of moon. Back when we used to take holidays. Back when we were allowed to take holidays. I can only assume the sea is still there.

Every so often I lie back on the spare bed and am thankful we are together. I've started sleeping in here, to give you space.

In the morning I hear your voice and pad down the hallway. You are speaking to your sister's friend, her voice surges over the internet. The familiar smell of our bedroom seeps from the door. I don't enter. I stand just out of sight, listen as she says there is no change. They still won't let anyone into the hospital, but she knows a nurse who is keeping an eye on Rebecca. The NHS is doing an amazing job. London's hospitals are the best in the world.

I hear you sob, but I don't go in. I don't know what to say. I won't be able to say what needs to be said. Words just fail me. I like to think of myself as a man of action. I will make you a coffee, that's one thing I'm good at. I go to the kitchen, I can still hear your sister's friend. Rebecca is young, she says. It's the old people you have to worry about.

The coffee is cold by the time you appear. I should have taken it to you. I tell you Rebecca is a tough Kiwi girl who takes after her mother, but the words sound distant. Isolated. Let's go get some fresh air.

We walk as if walking has just been invented, a new craze sweeping the nation. The cure for all idleness.

Every day we walk, following the crisscrossed streets down to the park and along the nonchalant river. Trudging the same well-worn track like prisoners during exercise hour. Occasionally we see other walkers in the distance, huddled like ducks under raupō, smiles disguising suspicious glances in our direction. No one wants to get too close. We have all become obsessed in checking that other people are following the rules.

A breeze slips between us, pausing momentarily as if confused how to fill the chasms that have unexpectedly opened. It lifts the hairs on my arm, huffs gentle ripples.

A wildling plum tree twists over the bank amongst the pines and kōwhai. The indifferent result of a thoughtless stone spitter. Fruit clusters in purple bubbles, slowly ripening. You reach to pluck one, enclose its plump shape in caging fingers.

“Do you remember how she used to love eating plums?” you ask, and for a moment I hear Rebecca squeal in delight and disgust as the taut skin bursts and juice soaks her hands.

You slip the plum into the pocket of your coat, swaddled with used tissues and the strip of blue satin ribbon from Rebecca’s baby blanket. I see you sometimes, twisting the cool fabric around your fingers, lost in thought.

We continue to walk, aware of the people-shaped holes that surround us. I say we are like scattered stick figures in a child’s drawing, never quite touching and enveloped by spaces.

“Remember the gaps in her baby teeth?” I say. “The spaces in between? We thought they would never close up, but the rifts eventually disappeared.”

The daytime moon glows weakly, not letting its tenuous hold on the sky slip. Gibbous and not-quite-all-there, it floats between the branches of the trees. I find it strangely distracting, like a crooked painting on the wall.

We talk as we walk, because some things are better said side by side. Our shadows flicker and fold amongst the long grass and sunlight dappled under the trees. They touch and merge, ignorant of social distancing and the etiquette of polite behaviour.

“Your shadow has always been taller than mine,” I say.

“Taller?” you reply. “Or stretched more thinly?”

There is an asymmetry to our conversation, a lopsidedness. You talk of loneliness, climate change, the swimability of rivers. How we’ve managed to bury our growing isolation under work and the raising of a child. You mention that you need to go to the supermarket later, and you have an app that tells you how long the queues are.

I point out that swimability isn’t a word, that they are working on a vaccine, and that Wednesdays and Thursdays are busiest at supermarkets because that’s when benefits are paid.

We watch as the breeze unexpectedly catches a plastic bag, blows it across the park between the distanced and the disconnected.

“Do you think she’ll be OK?” you ask. “Will she ever come home?”

“You don’t see plastic bags very often these days,” I say, as it balloons and deflates, swirling high in the air before crumpling flaccidly in the river.

The wind slides between us, and the bag floats unimpeded to the sea.