

Neighboring Parts of This Planet

Elizabeth Edelglass

They are in my basement, the boy and the girl. The boy is not circumcised. The girl is, although that's not what they call it. I know, because my husband said they had to delouse when they arrived—he insisted, even though they didn't have lice. They are Americans, born here, although that's not what we call them anymore. My husband said they had to be naked for the delousing, and I had to watch. I think he thought I wouldn't do it, and then he wouldn't have to keep them.

I filled the laundry sink in the basement with my own ration of hot water (no shower down there, but luckily this laundry sink plus a toilet, the maid's toilet, I used to thoughtlessly call it). In the linen closet, behind my daughters' old Hello Kitty quilts, I found delousing shampoo left from their preschool days. I'd finally had to forbid my girls from sharing the dress-up tiaras. They cried. Now dress-up is forbidden in schools, except for desert camouflage. They're both in the army now, my girls, in real desert camouflage. My mother says there are lice in army barracks. I couldn't buy delousing shampoo, even if I had the money; the army takes whatever they need, which is why store shelves are bare. My husband has taken to hanging out behind the Stop & Shop, scavenging for wilted vegetables, expired canned goods. If he finds canned beans, we pretend we're camping.

My leftover shampoo is long past expiration. But they don't have lice, this boy and this girl. I know. I looked. In their scalps, and also down below. It was humiliating. But I'm no good at lying, at least not to my husband. I lie to the neighbors and to the block commander about the boy and the girl in my basement. I hate lying to the neighbors, but if they knew, they'd be in danger. Even not knowing, I've probably put them in danger. The block commander, well, he deserves the lies.

I couldn't see where the girl had been cut, down there, but

she could tell I was looking, so she told me. It has always been their way, she said, her mother and her grandmothers and their mothers before, ancient tradition from another, faraway country. Here in America, now, even we Jews have stopped cutting our boys down there, not because we've suddenly decided it's barbaric, but because it's been outlawed. Not that we always obey the law.

Thank God we had girls, my husband and me, so we didn't have to decide whether or not to cut boys. Today, Jewish parents of sons must choose—God's covenant of six thousand years, or American law of the moment? At least American law banning ritual circumcision now keeps Jewish sons masked down below, so maybe safe. My husband's brother kept his son masked, and my mother-in-law didn't speak to his wife for months.

My mother knows about the boy and the girl in our basement. She brings soup, when she can. Just like the girl has stories from her foreign foremothers, so too my mother from hers, stories about the Great Depression, when her immigrant grandmother learned how to make one-chicken-leg soup to feed a family of six. Somehow my mother knows the recipe, a recipe she wasn't ever supposed to need.

My mother says her grandmother could also make a dozen *kneidlach* with only one egg. They don't know what *kneidlach* are, the boy and the girl, but they can say the word, just right, with its guttural "accchh" at the end. Their ancestors and mine once inhabited neighboring parts of this planet. I could surely learn to pronounce their names, if they would tell me. They arrived at my house with no papers.

"It's better you don't know," the boy said when I asked. "It doesn't matter." But it does.

So I've named the boy Lou, after my mother's uncle, who also once hid, although in a dirt hole under the plank floor of a barn, not in a paneled basement with a foldout couch. In Europe, not here in America. Above his head, the never-ending clamor of hooves—dairy cows, hence milk, yet forever after, Uncle Lou was deathly afraid of thunder.

Lou wasn't the uncle's real name either, but the name he took when he finally made it to America, after the hiding was done and we thought nobody would ever have to hide again. There was another uncle, Fyvush, who hid with Lou in the dirt hole under the hooves. He might've become Philip, had he made it to America. I debated whether to call the boy in my basement Lou or Philip. Jews consider it bad luck to name a child after someone who died a tragic death, yet good luck to name a child after someone who was martyred while sanctifying God (in the camps, but also the forests and barns and basements of Europe). In the end, I chose Lou, because my mother knew and loved the original Lou. I needed my mother to like him.

My mother has one photo of *her* Lou and Philip, dark beards and jackets nearly bursting from burly shoulders not intended to be squeezed into narrow basement holes. *My* Lou is slight—eighteen, he says, although hunger can stunt growth—with a beard so scraggly that it deserves another name. Which is good. Just as Jewish boys are marked by what's inside their trousers, so boys like Lou wear their identities on their faces. Smooth cheeks surely helped my Lou survive long enough to find his way to my basement.

The girl, I named Ruth, for biblical Ruth, a Moabite who followed her mother-in-law to live amongst the Jews. My Ruth followed her brother to live in my Jewish basement. In the Bible, Ruth, the foreigner, eventually marries a Jew and is accepted by the community. An important story, for these times.

My husband just calls them the boy and the girl, if he mentions them at all. He changed his name, too, my husband, after he lost his job at the bank. Not that we thought of ourselves as foreigners, my husband and I. We grew up here. His bar mitzvah, my bat mitzvah, our wedding, in the same synagogue. That synagogue has been converted to municipal offices now, the tax collector and animal control—is there some significance to those choices for this building? The Jewish star remains in the masonry, like Jewish stars I've seen on European vacations adorning offices, restaurants, pharmacies. European airports are closed now, travel suspended. We carry our

passports just to leave the house.

Some churches have been closed, too. And, of course, all the mosques. You have to belong to the *right* church, or none at all. Which doesn't mean people have stopped praying.

II

My mother no longer brings soup. Too dangerous to carry a pot through the streets. If she is stopped, what will she say? *My children are hungry?* We have our own ration books, they know, the people who stop pedestrians to check papers and packages and pots.

Today, she brought the newspaper, stuffed in her brassiere. That's what we still call it, the newspaper, although there's no news, just dictums and directives, often a single sheet, easy to fold and stash next to my mother's bosom. Even this non-newspaper is not readily available, as if words are dangerous. My mother gets the paper the same way she gets an extra chicken leg—don't ask. Today's dictum is about deportations.

"Everyone from the camps," my mother says. She knows that includes Lou and Ruth's parents. "Deported," she says, running fingers through grizzled hair. Unlike many of her friends, my mother never colored her hair. If only she had a bottle of hair dye lying around, perhaps we could turn Lou and Ruth (and ourselves) into acceptable blonds. "Except nobody wants them," she says.

Deported. Some of the camps are FEMA trailers left from floods and hurricanes, *natural* disasters. But some so-called "foreigners" are encamped in hotels, Holiday Inns and Marriotts otherwise vacant since tourists, the real foreigners, now stay home. I've preferred to imagine Lou and Ruth's parents with mini-bars and bountiful breakfast buffets.

RETURN TO HOMELAND, the non-newspaper headline reads. But Lou and Ruth's parents were born here, just like Lou and Ruth, although *their* parents came from someplace else. That someplace else, their so-called homeland, doesn't want them, says they're too

American, while America says they're too foreign. Deportation, when no other country will accept you—a euphemism for something worse?

“Will you tell them?” my mother whispers. Lou and Ruth surely hear us moving about, although not our voices through the extra carpeting my husband laid down, not to protect them from our thunderous footsteps, but to protect us from unexpected basement sounds that might get us arrested. He pulled that extra carpet from one of the abandoned houses in one of the abandoned neighborhoods where Lou and Ruth and their people used to live. He was lucky to get it before others moved in and made themselves at home.

Lacking soup, my mother and I descend the stairs with bread—the two slices allotted for my cheese-sandwich lunch. Today I will eat only cheese. Tomorrow I will have the bread, and Lou and Ruth will have the cheese.

First thing, Lou asks for the newspaper. My mother says she couldn't get one today.

“Maybe there's no news,” she laughs. Then, “Look what I *do* have,” and she extracts a colored pencil from her purse, deep red, the color of cherry pie, or blood. “Cerise,” she announces. Stupidly, I gave Ruth a diary when she arrived, but she doesn't write optimistic notes to someone named Kitty. She draws. Airplanes and guns and flames and blood. Our leader would say these are her plans, hers and her people's, their plans for us. I know these are just pictures of the things Ruth fears, the same things I fear.

My mother brings colored pencils one at a time, hoping not to attract attention from the pocketbook checkers in the street. She cannot bring paints. Paints can be used for protest signs and anti-government graffiti, so paints have been outlawed.

Ruth swallows her bread in one mouthful, gulping tea she's been steeping from the one teabag we all shared at breakfast, then pulls out her stash of pencils. She will save her new cerise for the future, this girl who still believes in the future. For now, she tackles green and brown—trees, like the lush forest I used to imagine when

hearing childhood stories of Uncle Lou's eventual escape from his basement. She sharpens a nub of yellow—flames for the forest—with a steak knife I gave her, from a set of a dozen, once a wedding gift. We don't have dinner parties anymore, have no need of a dozen steak knives; my husband will never notice.

Lou nibbles his bread, will save most for later, maybe for Ruth. Despite his limited diet, he's grown thicker in my basement, in the neck and shoulders. I've seen him doing pushups on one of the Hello Kitty quilts on the floor. The first time, I thought he was praying. He sleeps down there, too, probably a sin to share a bed with his sister, even if that bed is a foldout couch in a basement with a floor of cold concrete.

Ruth is younger, thirteen? Bat mitzvah age, if she were one of us. When she arrived, I couldn't guess her age, what with her punk hairdo, one side long and angular, the other nearly shaved. I wondered what her mother must've thought about that haircut, until she told me her mother was a hairdresser, had styled it herself. Later, I learned her mother had owned the salon, had owned a chain of salons, even one at the mall where I used to get my hair cut. Someone else owns them now.

It should've been her mother, not me, when Ruth approached last month with downcast eyes and bloody panties. I had only tampons, not at all the right thing for a child, a first-timer. I hesitated to describe what she must do with the tampon—she'd been cut down there, but stitched? I would ask my daughters to bring home pads from the PX, if I knew when they might come home, if I even knew where they were. Probably somewhere in the desert, in that part of the world where their ancestors and Lou's and Ruth's and mine once walked the earth as brothers.

Now it's my mother who sometimes trims the angular sweep of Ruth's hair. She can't bring herself to shave the other side. Shaved heads and basement captivity have frightening connotations for her, for us, although possibly not for young Ruth.

"It's time," my mother says to Lou. "Queen's Gambit?" She's

been teaching him chess, which they will play with the intensity of generals moving battalions across a map table while I go to my weekly bridge game, which still meets in the card room at the library. I will bid one-no-trump and make small talk, as if I don't have a boy and a girl in my basement. After the game, I will work my new job shelving books, hourly minimum wage. The other women in my bridge club have also found jobs. One is a school lunch lady, one of those hairnet women we used to make fun of. But school lunches mean leftovers. We would all rather slop spoonfuls of mashed potatoes than shelve books. We used to have a book club at the library, too, until one day a sign appeared: Book Club Cancelled. Books are still okay, for now (except those already designated for "recycling"), but apparently talking about books could be dangerous.

I would like to bring home books for Ruth, maybe those harmless Baby-Sitters Clubs that my girls used to read. Except the librarian knows my girls are grown and gone. We used to have a TV in the basement, until my husband carried it out. To sell it, he said, but I like to think he was protecting Lou and Ruth from what there was to see of the world—bombings and burnings and bloody beheadings. They have no phones, having dumped them before they arrived at our house. The government doesn't pin labels onto clothes nowadays, no yellow stars, no crescents cut from cloth. But they do track phones. My mother says they've started implanting identifiers into clothing, even into bodies, under the skin, a quick pinch while in line for ration books or waiting to cross the street. Thank God Lou and Ruth came to us before that, at least we assume, we pray, so far no knock on our door.

III

My husband hangs out so often behind the Stop & Shop, waiting for the trash, hiding in shadows, or so he thinks, that eventually someone offers him a job on the loading dock.

"Could be a trap," my husband says, but he is hungry. He used

to lift weights at the athletic club. Now he lifts crates of canned goods and corn flakes.

One night, after a week on the job, he goes down to the basement, which he rarely does, preferring to avoid the reality of the boy and the girl who should not be down there. I hear closet doors opening, heavy things moving, zippers zipping. He comes up with insulated ski gloves, from when we used to ski. Corn flakes are easier to lift, he explains, packages half-full of air, but the refrigerator trucks give him access to the guys in the meat department. One meat cutter speaks a language that isn't Spanish, isn't Arabic, but also isn't English. He works alone, my husband says, eats lunch alone, takes his smoke breaks alone.

The next day, my husband comes home with a pack of cigarettes. He has never smoked. "Money well spent," he says, on a day when I have eaten only cheese and Lou and Ruth only bread.

My husband takes the cigarettes into the yard after a plain-pasta dinner to teach himself to smoke. But his coughing will alert the neighbors. So he comes back inside, smokes and coughs in the living room. He vomits. I bring a cool cloth for his head. I clean up the mess.

After that, he smokes in the bathroom, first one cigarette each night, then two.

"Is he sick?" Ruth asks. She must've heard.

"No," I say. "Don't worry."

"Is there medicine?" she asks. "Still?" It's getting cold in the basement. She wears my old bathrobe over her summer shorts; I don't want *her* to get sick.

"I'm sure, if we need it."

"I wonder if Mom and Dad have medicine," she says, "where they are."

"Yes," Lou says without looking up from the chessboard, where he plays against himself. "They have medicine."

My husband learns to smoke without coughing, forces himself to control the reflexes of his own throat. He must learn quickly.

There are only twenty cigarettes in the pack. By the end of the week, he comes home with meat scraps in his pockets, blood leaking from butcher-paper wrappings.

“Janusz,” he says. “His name is Janusz.”

That night we eat meat with our pasta. I struggle to trim the gristle off the meat on my plate using a butter knife. Last month the block commander appeared with a sack, demanding we hand over anything sharp: carving knives, scissors (Ruth’s hair now tucked behind her ears), gardening clippers, and steak knives, eleven steak knives. I barely dared breathe should the block commander count out the steak knives. His wife would’ve noticed, eleven steak knives, one missing.

Janusz’s meat is mostly gristle. I try not to trim too much, or there’ll be nothing left to eat. My husband reaches with his fork, spears and eats what I have trimmed. After that, I trim more generously.

After dinner, I scrub the blood from his pants in the kitchen sink. With no money to run the electricity-eating washer and dryer, I’ve been washing clothes in the basement laundry sink, hanging them to dry on a rope I’ve strung down there, using wall hooks my husband once installed for exercising with weights and straps. The exercise wall, now the clothesline wall, directly faces the foldout couch where Ruth sleeps every night under her Hello Kitty quilt. I will keep these bloodstained pants upstairs.

The water is cold, no longer enough oil to run the water heater. My hands chafe as I wash the dishes, then scrub the bloody pants. Our leader says when we win the wars, we’ll have all the oil we want, oil flowing through the streets. Just like Uncles Lou and Fyvush, in their dugout under those cows, supposedly dreamt of American streets paved with gold.

I huddle into a coat over my clothes before carrying down pasta to Lou and Ruth, pasta with no meat. Ruth in my bathrobe and I in my coat, both of us descended from ancient traditions of female modesty.

On the exercise/laundry wall where tonight no laundry hangs, Lou is experimenting with my husband's hooks. The straps and weights are long gone, since the time when my husband had worked his way up at the bank and could afford the athletic club, but Lou has figured out a way to swing from the clothesline rope, grabbing at the highest hooks, hoisting his body by the growing strength of his arms. He is preparing, for I-don't-know-what. This basement does have one sliver of window, high up near the ceiling, possibly big enough to slither through. But outside that window no forest haven, no dark and sheltering canopy of trees. Just neighbors on all sides, with only driveways and a few scrawny azaleas in between. And backyards with swing sets and children, parents watching. And dogs. Dogs that bark.

IV

October passes without Halloween; November comes without elections. Our leader says times are too precarious to change course. Once, he was elected; now he cancels elections.

“For the good of the people,” he says.

“To avoid riots,” my mother says.

On what should have been Election Day, he stages rallies across the country, thousands cheering and chanting his name. For one day, electricity is free, so even the poorest can watch on TV. The cheering crowds—are they actors? Day laborers hired off street corners? The way immigrants used to gather on street corners for construction work, when there used to be construction work, when immigrants used to gather in public. That night there is looting, neighborhoods burned, swastikas painted by people who still have paints.

One day soon after, my husband says Janusz is going to Canada.

“How?” I ask. Special papers are needed to cross the border. Papers that nobody can get, at least nobody like Janusz and us.

“He knows someone.” We are at the dinner table, and my husband is savoring the gristle in his mouth, chewing and sucking and probing with his tongue, as if this might be his last almost-meat, if

Janusz leaves. “He says we should come,” my husband says. “He can get us out, too.”

“And them?” I nod towards the basement.

“They can’t pass,” he says.

“And we can?” I look at him, with his dark curly hair, like mine, and his beard growing in thicker than Lou’s. All men have beards now, an irony possibly missed by those who decided to confiscate razorblades.

“Better than them,” my husband says. He has blue eyes; I have freckles.

“Who’ll take care of them?” I ask.

My husband’s Adam’s apple bobs up and down as he forces a particularly tough piece of gristle down his throat.

I don’t plan to mention this to my mother, but she can tell.

“I’ll stay with them,” she says. “You should go. It should be you.”

Why me? A blink of fate? Once upon a time, I had a once-a-week housekeeper, an immigrant who knew my basement, my laundry sink, my maid’s toilet. Who knew other immigrants, from other communities, who shared their native foods and fears. Then this boy and this girl, strangers, found their way to my basement. Then my husband met another stranger in the shadows near the trash behind the Stop & Shop.

My mother brings my father’s gold watch for the bribe, tucked in her brassiere, warm from her bosom. My father’s gold watch, the only item of value that his grandfather brought from Europe, arriving in America just in time to be sent back to fight the War To End All Wars, which didn’t. Then worn by my father’s father through France, Italy, Germany, in the war that taught us to Never Forget, or so we thought. Then passed to my father, who did *not* flee to Canada to escape Vietnam. Who fought for his country, like our girls do now.

My husband takes the watch.

A few days later, my mother brings paints for Ruth—actual paints in stunning shades, cerise, cerulean, ocher. And marble chess

pieces for Lou, king and queen from a set that also belonged to my father. She would've brought the whole set, if she could've fit it in her purse, from which she now produces six paint bottles, one paintbrush, and two chess pieces each as big as her fist, as if she didn't care who might have stopped her to check.

She also brings news.

"A protest," she says. "On Sunday," which our leader has officially designated the Lord's Day, although I see no evidence that he is one for prayer. "On the green," she says, the town green where once Revolutionary soldiers mustered for General Washington. "A call for elections," she says, "freedom of speech, freedom of worship, a return to the Constitution."

There will be protest signs. That's how my mother got these paints, from some Underground Railroad for poster board and art supplies. My mother has been making signs.

"A sit-in," she says, "like the sixties. Peaceful, unless they try to rough us up..." She is smiling.

Now, who will stay with Lou and Ruth, I don't say. My mother plays chess with Lou, tells stories about Woodstock and Kent State and Selma, as if she'd been there. She hugs me tight before she leaves, her breasts soft and familiar against mine. If I feel anything else, anything hard and unexpected and maybe dangerous inside her brassiere, I don't mention it.

On Sunday, there is no television, no news. The block commander paces our street all afternoon and long into the night. Every hour, he pounds on our door, insists that my husband and I present ourselves for his inspection, studying the list on his clipboard to ensure that everyone who lives in this house is accounted for, as if there weren't only (officially) the two of us, easy to count. We don't bother going to bed, just sit in our clothes on the couch in the dark, waiting for the jolt of his fist against our door.

My husband slides a broom under the couch, all he can think of to defend us with. He once had a baseball bat, but the block commander confiscated that. No scissors, no steak knives, no baseball

bats, yet every pureblooded “American” still entitled to a gun. Surely some of our neighbors are sleeping with their guns tonight. My husband’s leg jerks to the rhythm of his nerves, his foot tap-tap-tapping on the floor. I rest my hand on his knee, with a nod towards the ears in our basement.

V

On Monday, my mother doesn’t come. I phone her house, listen to her voice on the machine. I find some old movie-star magazines and bring them downstairs for Ruth. I offer to play Monopoly with Lou, but he prefers to play chess against himself. His belly is flat, nearly concave from hunger, but his fingers are callused from the hooks and the rope, and his shoulders bulge like Uncles Lou and Fyvush in my mother’s precious photo.

Three more days, my mother doesn’t come, doesn’t answer her phone. I barely sleep, barely eat, give my portion of meat gristle to Lou and Ruth in the basement. Janusz hasn’t left yet. There is still time for us.

On the fifth day, when I phone my mother’s house, I hear a different recording, not my mother’s voice. I grab my passport and literally run to her house, no gasoline for my car in months.

A woman who is not my mother answers my knock. A woman whose hair is blond, not dyed, opens the door with a smile that disappears when she sees me.

“Wrong house,” she says, then shuts the door in my face. A face she clearly recognizes. I wonder what she has done with my wedding photo on my mother’s piano, the photos of me holding each of my newborn girls that hung in my mother’s kitchen, the photos of birthdays, bat mitzvahs, graduations that smiled upon her upstairs hall, the record of my aging face up to the sweating, red-cheeked, tear-streaked face that lingers uselessly outside no-longer-my-mother’s-front-door.

“It was Janusz,” I cry, beating my husband’s chest with my fists

when he tries to comfort me that night.

“It wasn’t Janusz,” my husband says.

Better Janusz than me. Was this my fault, that my mother is gone? Because of Lou and Ruth? Because of the uncircumcised boy and the circumcised girl I took into my basement? Must I send them away? Where? Or is it too late for that?

“It’s not too late,” my husband says, hugging me tight. “For us.” He doesn’t say it was my fault. He doesn’t say it wasn’t my fault. He doesn’t say my mother made her own choice, did not choose me.

VI

My husband says to pack light, but warm. He doesn’t know how we will travel to the border, how far we will have to walk. He lays out hiking boots, ski jackets with zip-in-zip-out linings, woolen socks, long underwear, even two rolls of toilet paper. He loads his backpack, then mine. Then he adds my extra sweater and sneakers to his pack. He is going with Janusz. He will carry my sweater and my shoes, so he expects me to join them. I still haven’t said I will go.

But I prepare. I boil pasta and pack it in Tupperware. I use extra ration coupons to buy a block of cheese, instead of pre-sliced, so my husband won’t notice the barest slivers I shave off for myself, saving most for when it might be needed downstairs. One day, I ask my husband to ask Janusz for a chicken leg, and I experiment with my mother’s soup, thin and watery but somewhat soup-like, which I portion into more Tupperwares. There’s an old fridge in the basement, which I could plug in, when the time comes, if the time comes. I think we’re allowed two months of unpaid bills, maybe more, before the electric company will shut us off, shut *them* off, Lou and Ruth in our basement.

Ruth asks what is happening. Surely she noticed when my husband dragged our ski duffels up from the basement. Maybe she smelled the soup.

“Nothing,” I say.

Lou leans over the chessboard, leg jiggling like my husband's. His beard has thickened. I wonder about Ruth's hair down below. It's been months since I could get Tampax. She washes her bloody rags and hangs them on the clothesline rope. I hang my own bloody rags in the bathroom upstairs.

The night before Janusz will depart, before my husband will depart, we fight. I plug in the basement refrigerator, without explanation to Lou and Ruth, and then I fight with my husband. I cry. He cries. There is no right or wrong here, just fear and possibility. We go to bed, but we do not sleep. We make love. My husband is heavy and strong, not from weights and pulleys in a gym in our basement, but from hefting cartons loaded with steaks intended for tables that are not ours, tables in the homes of people who belong to the right churches. He is urgent, yet also urgently careful, plunging and withdrawing. There must not be a baby, not now. Condoms, another thing the army has cleared from store shelves, for whatever our soldiers, our male soldiers in desert camouflage, might be allowed to do with young girls like Ruth.

In the morning, I carry tea to the basement. Will I carry down the Tupperwares? Will I go? The words have not yet been spoken.

Halfway down the stairs, I drop the teacups. They tumble and shatter. Hot tea splatters my leg, but I do not feel that pain.

What have they done, my Lou and Ruth? What have they done, with one steak knife and a clothesline rope? The Hello Kitty quilt on the couch now splashed with cerise that is not paint, the rope hanging taut from the highest hook on the wall that was meant for a diversion, a gym.

Warm liquid trickles down my leg, clad in jeans over two layers of underwear, silk and wool. Jagged shards of china, my grandmother's teacups with their golden edges and painted bluebonnets that so delighted Ruth, scatter sharp yet harmless round the lug soles of my hiking boots.

My mother once told me that, in that other faraway basement hiding place, Lou always wondered, never knew for sure, if Fyvush

stopped eating, gave up his food, so that one of them, Lou, might live. But was Fyvush still moving, maybe showing one last spark of salvageable life, when Uncle Lou grabbed what might or might not have been his only chance to flee that basement for the forest, with only his bare feet and the tattered clothes on his back? Was there a twitch, or an infinitesimal rustle—a pinkie finger, or possibly just a mouse—under the blanket of leaves that Uncle Lou had banked, all those months, in a desperate attempt to keep Fyvush warm? Like the flutter I might or might not see, now, from the shambles of Ruth’s sullied sheets.

I stand on the stairs, halfway, neither here nor there, while, from above, my husband calls my name. It is time.

