

Glass

Anna Round

The broken bottle is not Eddie's fault. He thinks about saying so, but Marissa isn't inclined to listen and anyway he would be addressing her bum as she bends forward to collect the glass. He regards the outline of her substantial pants under a clinging skirt that drops to her ankles, the hem grey where it skims the pavement. Shards and slivers have sprinkled all over the road. Marissa casts from side to side with her dustpan and brush after the rainbow spikes, muttering about danger to cyclists, children, dogs. She hates dogs.

"I'd've cleared it up," says Eddie, although he probably wouldn't.

"Hunh." She pivots and addresses the kerb. "I leave it to you, we be findin' bits from now till Christmas. Move your boot!"

He retreats to the top step as Marissa whisks away the last pieces and straightens her spine, groaning. Her knees are bad and her bunions give her trouble, but her back is the worst. An old woman's ailments, but her face is unlined and her eyes are girlish sometimes, and in fact she is only thirty-nine while Eddie himself is knocking on sixty's door. He is tall and thin with a beaky nose and a greying ponytail, which almost reaches his belt now. He can't be bothered to get it cut. Leaning against the front door, he lights a cigarette.

"Them things'll kill you," says Marissa.

"I know. Want one?"

She shakes her head. Often she says yes, and they stand out here or go up to sit on the fire escape. She isn't allowed

to smoke at home, although her neighbours mostly ignore the rule. Marissa lives in the ground floor flat, which Ademoglu bought back in the nineties; he stripped out the fireplaces and plaster ceiling roses, flung up flimsy partitions, and let it out by the room. Tenants get a single bed and a skinny wardrobe and survival of the fittest in the kitchen and bathroom. Now he owns the whole first floor and half of the second. He's made a few offers for Eddie's attic, but he won't get his hands on that until Eddie leaves feet first.

Marissa wriggles her toes. Her feet are calloused in her wooden sandals, but she paints her toenails. Today they are bright plum purple, and there's a tiny silver ring on her fourth toe. She hands Eddie the dustpan to take down to the bin, where the fragments land with a satisfying crash.

"Thanks for that," he says. "You working tonight?"

"Always working."

"Yeah, me too. I'm late."

"Always late. What today?"

"Bar in Stoke Newington. Journo I know's interviewing a hot young film maker. Or an actor, maybe? Hot young something, anyway."

"Hot, huh? Boy or girl?"

"Boy. I think."

"You think?"

"Ashley. Could be either or neither. What'd you reckon?"

Marissa shrugs and wipes her hands on her skirt. "I got no time for guessing games after pickin' up after God knows who. You get off now or you get fired."

“They won’t fire me,” says Eddie. He knows he’s safe. He’s not like Marissa, who gets fired fairly regularly although she’s never late and picks up conscientiously after all and sundry.

He doesn’t know if Marissa is legal. Some of the people downstairs aren’t, and he suspects she might not be, although one of her jobs is fairly legit. He doesn’t ask. As far as he knows, she has no family in England, nor anywhere else come to that. Once she talked about her brother, but when he hazarded an innocent question she clammed up and didn’t accept a cigarette for a month. Her hours are too long for much of a social life. He isn’t even sure that her name is Marissa. He didn’t hear properly when she first told him, but if it’s not, she’s never put him right.

He came home drunk, four years ago, at midnight on a Saturday just after she moved in. Fumbling for his keys, he dropped a bottle on the step and Marissa, returning from work, told him to pick up the pieces. They stood in the warm night, smelling spilled beer. Marissa watched him gather the smashed glass, then went back indoors.

A couple of days later she was buying tomatoes and rice in the corner shop when he nipped in for cigarettes. Without knowing why he asked if she wanted to get a coffee and to his surprise she said yes. Afterwards she said it was because he’d done as she asked him; she hadn’t thought he would. They went to the smeary café and had espresso, and cheese sandwiches, and Marissa told him about her flat and about Ademoglu, whom she’d met twice (once to give him some of the deposit and get a key, once when he kicked out the guy in the next bedroom, with some helpers she didn’t like the look of).

Since then they’ve been friends. She has never entered Eddie’s flat nor invited him into her room. Instead they sit on the landing, the fire escape, the front steps, and talk. They talk about politics, music (she listens to the radio all the time but has no TV), London, the house, the neighbours, her work and his, and nothing very much. Sometimes a week passes, or longer, and they don’t see each other. Eddie travels a lot and Marissa spends most of her time cleaning: offices, houses, a hospital cafeteria.

Eddie is the oldest inhabitant in the house, although he doesn’t feel old. He’s been there thirty years, and he’s seen them come and go. He remembers when the flat downstairs belonged to an ancient professor, who yellowed slowly behind his big beard and his thousands upon thousands of books. He died in the library, which must have been much like home, and his students came and packed up all the volumes and took them off to his college. Then there was a hippy couple, with their friends and their babies. Smells of cannabis and shit wafted through their front door and up the stairwell. Then the flat was repossessed and Ademoglu bought it at an auction.

Eddie’s always been on good terms with his neighbours, but Marissa is his first real friend in the house. One day, he knows, she will no longer be there.

Ashley, a boy, is better company than he expected and Eddie stays for a few drinks after he’s taken the photographs. He still schleps around for jobs like this even though he makes more than enough from news gigs and commissions these days. He doesn’t need the money. His flat’s long since paid for, and since Heather remarried so is his divorce, but he likes to work. What else would he do?

Sauntering home around closing time, he breathes air heavy with spices and diesel. There’s not much traffic, even around King’s Cross. It’s quiet all the way until he’s nearly home and he realises that he’s walking towards a commotion; voices bubbling and agitated, engines running to stink up the summer night. Blue lights splinter over the tarmac, and when he turns the corner, an ambulance and two police cars are parked across the mouth of his street. Behind them Ademoglu, roused from somewhere, is dancing up and down on his fat little legs and shouting. His mouth moves like a cement mixer.

He’s been there thirty years, and he’s seen them come and go.

The street is full, everyone outside in pyjamas and t-shirts and dressing gowns. Eddie recognises the posh girls from two houses along and the Korean family from the basement. Marissa isn’t there. He doesn’t recognise anyone from her flat, but it’s their front door that crackles with yellow police tape.

The camera is still around his neck. Before he knows what he’s doing, Eddie’s looking through the viewfinder, taking pictures, catching people as they blink in the blue wash and the shock. His flash grabs wide eyes, pale brows, lips parted in question. The hallway gapes. He doesn’t know what’s happened, but he knows the fizz in the air which tells him something has. There’s another photographer by the ambulance, a guy he sort of knows, and a woman with a notebook and a Dictaphone. Bloody hell, he thinks, they got here quick.

A cop runs over and plucks at his elbow. “No pictures. No pictures. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to —”

“I live here.” Eddie lets the camera go; it slaps against his leather jacket. “What’s going on?”

“You live here, you say? What’s your address, please?”

“Number seventeen. The attic flat.”

“And were you at home this evening?”

“I’ve just finished work.”

She arches an eyebrow, and Eddie shrugs. “What’s happened, then?”

The cop demands identification. Eddie fishes out his driving licence and she checks her list, which he scans over her shoulder. The ground floor entry is sketchy and doesn’t include a Marissa, but ‘Edwin Green’ is present and correct

for upstairs. Reluctantly the cop scrawls a tick against his name and mutters that there has been an incident.

“What kind of incident?” Eddie asks, but her radio buzzes and she heads back to her car. Eddie looks around for Mr. Youn, or his downstairs neighbour, but instead, Ademoglu stomps over, waving his arms and scowling. “You see this?” he snorts. “They let this happen, then I can’t get in my own property. What’d I pay my taxes for, man? Huh? For this shit, this crap? You and I, we own these places, we have rights! We’ll tell ’em –”

“What happened?”

“One of them bum tenants of mine. He’s dead. The fucker.”

To Eddie’s surprise the news shocks him. He has seen enough death, photographed it too, framed scenes of violence and destruction and chosen his favourites, peering at them in the chemical fog of his darkroom where the smell of blood fades in acrid developer, dark stains white and purified through the lens. He’s used to turning horror into work. He thought he was hardened off, but now his hands shake and his head swims for a moment.

“Which one?” he asks, although he doesn’t know any of the men by more than sight.

“Which one, which one, how do I know, I don’t adopt them, I rent them a room. How do I know it’s even his real name, how do I tell if they’re lying to me when they rob me blind, they fuck off without paying me, they...”

Eddie suddenly wants to punch him in the face.

“Well, he isn’t going to pay you now,” he says shortly. Even in the dark he can see Ademoglu’s face turn puce, but the cop returns before he can answer. They won’t be allowed back in for a few more hours, perhaps until morning. Ademoglu lets out a squawk and launches into another tirade. No one says how the man died.

He is looking for Marissa. He doesn’t know this until he’s half-way to Highbury, peering into convenience stores and cafés and down alleyways. She has mentioned a job near Islington Green, cleaning some building that closes up at eleven, but he can’t remember where. A supermarket? A bar? No; one of those language schools over the shops, long banks of booths with computers and headphones. She’d laughed about the students parroting their stilted sentences, the ones who stay late while she sweeps around their feet. He finds a couple of places that might be the right one. At the first, he leans on the bell for five minutes but no one answers. The second is up a grimy stairway with two doors, neither locked. Eddie sticks his head around the door, where a woman is wiping at the headsets with a dirty cloth. She doesn’t know a Marissa, she says. It’s just her, nobody else.

On the way back down the Caledonian Road, he keeps an eye on the all-night shops and burger bars. For a bit he follows the canal, remembering that she likes to walk there in good weather. A figure on a bench looks familiar from a distance, but it’s not her; he doesn’t know how he could have

made the mistake. He remembers suddenly that she gave him a phone number, once; he saved it, and now he scrolls through his contacts and jabs at the screen. It rings and rings and rings.

The police car is still outside the house. Eddie doesn’t bother trying to go home but checks into a cheap hotel for the night, takes a boiling shower, uses a tiny toothbrush from a plastic pack, drops asleep the second he lies down. He doesn’t remember his dreams, but they leave him shattered. Late the next morning, he walks round to the house, shows his driving licence again and rattles his keys at the two officers guarding the door. They let him in.

The entrance to the ground floor flat is covered in plastic sheeting, and ghosts in white overalls drift on the other side. The house seems to be empty, apart from the police and Eddie himself. His steps echo, an unanswered question on the deserted landing. With relief, he slides his key into the attic door and falls inside where it’s blissfully unchanged.

He puts on a CD, lies on the sofa, smokes, reads for a while.

The phone is ringing. Eddie’s on his feet, grabbing the receiver, before he knows what he’s doing and of course it’s a wrong number. Marissa rarely makes calls – too expensive – but even she must count this an emergency. He showers and makes coffee, and thinks about working but he can’t concentrate, disastrous in the darkroom. His phone is silent, dark, mocking, and he needs to get out.

On the doorstep, a cop asks where he is going.

“Does it matter?”

The man shrugs. “We’ll have to take statements from all the residents, just as soon as forensics are done.”

“Good luck with that.”

“This is a serious situation, Mr. Green.”

“Don’t I know it,” mutters Eddie.

He’s wandering down Swinton Street when he spots a face through the misted window of a cafe. If he’d had to describe Marissa’s neighbours he couldn’t have done it but he knows the man behind the glass, a grubby copy of the *Mirror* in his hands and a black knit cap pulled low over his eyes.

When Eddie sits down opposite him, the man drops the paper and starts to stand up, but Eddie’s hand is around his wrist. He pulls, but Eddie, to his own surprise, holds tight.

“What d’you want?” The words come out in a whispered shriek. “What d’you want from me? I done nothing wrong.”

“I’m not here to make trouble. I just want to know if you’ve seen Marissa.”

“Marissa...?”

“From your flat. Have you seen her since... last night?”

There were seven rooms, five of which had been occupied; Marissa and a silent, scarred girl who’d been there less than a month were the only women. “She had the room at the front. You know who I mean.”

The man blinks a couple of times, then smiles slyly.

“Her?” he says. “Oh, yeah, her. You wanna know about her?”

I bet you do.”

“Yeah, I do.” Eddie keeps his voice flat but leaves his hand where it is.

“What’s she to you, huh? Who’s askin’ about her? Who’s...”

“Nobody. Just me.”

“I seen her.”

“When? Where?” Eddie notices that the man is shaking slightly. His nails are cracked and discoloured, his thumb-pads splayed. It would be good to photograph them.

“Last night.” He wipes his mouth on his sleeve. “Last night, course. That’s what you mean, innit? Oh yeah, she was home alright. She was home.”

“What time?” says Eddie, but the man cackles and buries his face again in the mug.

“Late,” he says when he emerges. “Late, late. Right before the police came. She was outa there, she was fast outa there.”

“And you? Did you hang around to talk to the cops?”

“What –” The mug lands back on the table with a crack. “What you sayin’?”

“I’m saying it sounds like you both got the hell out of there. Don’t blame you. So did I.” The conversation annoys him; why did he even start it? Surely the only reason Marissa is out of sight is because she’d found the lowest place to lie, the one she needed because – unlike Eddie – she didn’t have money, or a title deed to the flat she’d fled. She’d be back, stoic or sardonic, once the fuss had died down. And where did he get off himself, giving this poor bastard the third degree?

“Did you know him?” he asks more gently, letting go. “The guy who died?”

The man worries at the tabletop with his ravaged fingers. “No. Not – no.”

“Hell of a shock.”

The man shrugs. Eddie thinks about staying, buying him another coffee, but instead he gets up to leave. He’s on his way to the door when the man adds, “But Marissa. Last week, man. She was yellin’ at him, yellin’ at him like she wanted to kill him.”

He’s yelled at enough people, been yelled at enough, to know it doesn’t mean anything. Even so, he tries to visit all the places he’s seen Marissa outside the house and every one of them is empty. A little before six he’s outside a pub he sometimes visits off the Grey’s Inn Road, and it feels like time to stop. He pushes the hefty wooden door but meets resistance. When he shoves harder, he realises that someone is on the other side, buffing the stained glass with a cloth. The person steps back to let him in; at first he thinks he’s hallucinating when he sees it’s Marissa.

“Christ almighty!”

Marissa shrinks. She backs into the shadows, the cloth twisted and hard in her hands and her eyes cast down to the floor.

“What are you doing here?” Eddie demands.

The cloth cracks. “Work,” she mutters. “Work here, three days a week. I get off at six.”

She’s so matter-of-fact that he almost laughs, until the tear trickles down her cheek. “God, Marissa,” he says. “You – you just came to work? Where were you last night?”

He has to lean close to hear her answer. “Laundrette. Twenty-four hour. And today, I... I got nowhere else to go. So I came to work.”

It makes as much sense as anything else.

“But now...” She looks around. “Now, I go. I’m done here.”

“You’re going home?”

She shakes her head until her hair covers her eyes. “Can’t... can’t go home. You know.”

“Last week, man. She was yellin’ at him, yellin’ at him like she wanted to kill him.”

He thinks of saying that the police won’t care about her immigration status, not now, but it’s probably not true. And he doubts she has a friend or a relative where she can stay. If she did, she’d be there already.

“I gotta go.”

“Go where, Marissa?”

She avoids his eyes. “I can’t go back.”

She pushes past him towards the door, but Eddie follows her. They hover in the vestibule, the glass half-cleaned.

“I know,” he says. “I know that. But... let me help you. Work it out...”

“Work out?” There’s an echo of her old sarcasm but it withers as fast as it came. “Work out? What can I work out? This is bad...”

He doesn’t know what to say, but he leads her to a booth and gets her a brandy, remembering that she’s accepted it before as they sat on the fire escape at the end of a long week. The glass and the drink and the chintzy wall light make her face seem golden although he knows she’s grey and pale.

Of course she is innocent. He knows because she hasn’t even considered the possibility that the yelling might mean something else. She had bawled the dead man out after she caught him stealing food from the new girl in the flat. The first rule of having nothing is that you don’t take from people who have less. Marissa tells Eddie this not to prove her innocence, but because it’s what happened. She never even knew his name; she just called him a thieving swine. The girl was too scared to confront him, but Marissa had standards. Eddie’s had his own fridge for thirty years.

“So he was a prick,” says Eddie. “Look, I’ll vouch for you. I’ll say –”

“But then I found him,” she murmurs, twisting her

hands in her skirt. She opens and closes her mouth and then words gush out so quickly that she might choke on them. “I come back and his door is open, the music loud, and I think, that asshole, people are trying to sleep, and I go to tell him, and – and he is there. On the bed. I know he – he is – he has gone. I seen enough people dead. And his neck...” She makes a clawing motion at her collar. “Torn. Like ribbons. Threads. Like if an animal... and, on the bed by him...” Her voice clots and dries.

“You can tell me,” says Eddie. He’s numb, like the first numbness of real cold, or drunkenness, or fever.

“The bottle,” says Marissa. “*That* bottle. The one I clean up. The part left whole, the neck and the, the...” With her hands she describes the shoulders of a bottle. Eddie thinks how odd it is that there is no word for this. Marissa’s clothes are clean, bloodless. “And I know, my – hands. My fingertips, on the glass...”

“Fingerprints,” says Eddie. “Oh Christ.”

“So – I ran. I ran.”

“Ran. Right. And did anyone...?”

“The other man, he come home. He see me. I pass him in the door.”

Eddie pushes the brandy glass across the table and she drinks. “I don’t know none of them,” she says. “We all... come home, get up, we work. Too busy, also what we say, them and me? Nothing alike. Just we here, not some-where else.”

“OK.” He makes himself breathe deeply. “OK. Look, I know a few decent lawyers. People who do criminal work. An immigration lawyer, come to that. I –”

“No.”

“Fuck it, Marissa, this is a big deal.” Eddie ran through the names of the lawyers in his head, people he’d met on news stories, a feature on refugees. What’s a little murder charge between professional acquaintances? “Look, I get why you don’t want to talk to the police. *All* the reasons, and I don’t give a shit about those. But –”

“No. No, no.”

Eddie knows he shouldn’t believe her story, and he believes it all the more. He sighs deeply and watches her eyes swell in the globe of her glass. “OK. OK, then. No lawyer, not yet anyway. But, we’ll figure this out, OK?”

Somehow he persuades her to come home with him, on the way buying a completely incongruous pizza, with anchovies and olives and extra cheese. Eddie scouts out the flat, but the cop has gone. There’s a cat’s cradle of yellow tape across the locked door of the downstairs flat. He signals to Marissa who scuttles from the street corner to the front door and up the stairs, panting with the effort until she reaches his attic.

She hesitates on the threshold as he switches on the lights and the television and the kettle. Eddie thinks she might vanish, but at last, she tiptoes inside and perches on the sofa while he makes coffee. She looks around, eyes sharp as knives.

“Nice,” she murmurs. “Not how I think your place is.”

He laughs. “What were you expecting? Take-out boxes and dirty socks?” In fact the flat is clean and pleasantly cluttered with thirty years of living.

Marissa gestures, as if stroking a smooth surface. “I expect, not so many things. I think black, shiny, silver metal. Machines, loudspeakers.”

“High tech minimalist. Not bloody likely.” He sinks into his wheezing wicker chair. “How are you, Marissa? You OK? You must be knackered.”

“Don’t matter.” She hunches her shoulders.

“You can hole up here for a bit, if you want.”

“They will come back. To ask. They ask...” She breaks off, shivering.

“About you?”

“About him.”

Eddie gives her a cigarette. Her lips tremble; it takes him a couple of tries to light it. “Yeah, well. We’ll deal with that. We can find another place for you, if you want. I’ll call a few people, in the morning.”

Does she know why she’s here, he wonders? Because he doesn’t. He looks around and his place is suddenly unrecognisable, a port in a storm, a life lived in a high attic. Marissa draws on her cigarette and gives him an unfamiliar smile.

“You don’t –” she says awkwardly.

Eddie goes into the kitchen to fetch plates. When he comes back, she is watching the smoke as it thins and vanishes.

“You don’t have to help,” says Marissa.

Eddie lights his own cigarette and cuts the pizza. They eat in silence, watching a black and white war film with chiselled men in uniforms and caps. “Heroes,” Marissa says sadly. She takes the blanket which he’s fetched for her and wraps it tightly around her shoulders.

I seen enough people dead, she’d told him. He’s seen plenty of dead bodies himself, and photographed most of them, but he’s never stumbled upon one unwarned.

At midnight he offers to sleep on the sofa so that she can have his bed. She refuses.

“I’ll change the sheets.”

“No. No need.” She gets up and marches into the bathroom. Eddie thinks of her using his soap, the bathmat, the toothbrush he bought at the corner shop. He fetches pillows and another blanket and a quilt, knowing she will feel cold although the night is mild.

How will he sleep in a house where a man was murdered? Probably he has done it before without knowing, but not a few scant hours after a warm and pulsing throat was slashed, not with bloody footprints still downstairs on the carpet. In the next room, Marissa turns, breathes, sighs. Outside there’s shouting and a car spits and starts. Eddie’s eyes won’t close. He resigns himself to a long night, but when he jolts up and up through layers of dark, he realises he’s been

When he wakes,
Eddie is warm and loose-limbed and the bed
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profoundly asleep.

Marissa stands by his bed, silhouetted like a vision in the light of the streetlamp. Naked she is taller and younger. Her body is all smooth curves and silky skin. He may be dreaming. Her breasts, which to his surprise he has never considered, swell like suns. Her legs are muscled, athletic; blinking and rubbing his eyes, he remembers that she walks everywhere. There is a long scar on her thigh.

She reaches out and folds back the bedclothes, and sits next to him. Cool fingers brush his chest and sadness pierces his heart. "Marissa," he murmurs. "There's no need..."

"I know."

"None —"

"It's not need."

"No — no. Sorry. I didn't mean that. You don't have to do this, I mean. You don't have to — I don't expect —"

Marissa smiles, sadly, sweetly. "I know."

"You don't owe me anything." He closes his eyes. "Go back to bed."

But she is still touching him.

"I don't expect anything from you," Eddie says again.

"I mean, I don't..." He almost says "I don't want", but that would have been a lie, now. "You don't have to do this. That's not why I asked you here."

"I know," she says again, leaning close. She smells of almonds. "I know, but — this, I choose. This, I want."

Eddie struggles to sit up. "Marissa. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"I don't want to hurt you..."

"You won't hurt me." Marissa grows small, cold, shading before his eyes into grey. If he pushes her away now she will dissolve into blood or dust. He doesn't understand — he likes to understand things — but he thinks she is hungry for human warmth, and that at least he has to give. "Oh, you are beautiful," he says, and takes her in his arms.

There is not love, but they make a little in the silver beam of streetlamp and moon. He strokes her free, clean curls and she runs a hand through his long hair. They fall asleep in an easy embrace, her soft body curled against his bony one. When he wakes, Eddie is warm and loose-limbed and the bed is half-empty. She has left as silently as if he had imagined her.

The police return to take his statement, and the ground floor flat is locked up. Ademoglu sells it a few months later. Eddie thinks often of Marissa. He wonders why he failed to photograph her, and the thought hurts like chemicals in a cut. The man's killer is not found. Eddie works his crime desk contacts but he knows, he will always know, that Marissa is innocent. One night the crash of a bottle breaking outside wakes him. He jumps out of bed and stumbles to the window, hoping she will be there, smiling up at him and scolding over the mess. But she is not, and he lies alone in his clean bed and cannot forget.