

Tamzin McDonald

The Girl Next Door

'There she is', the sight slightly wavering in the cool evening breeze behind a cream mesh curtain. He gasps breathlessly, mouth open and at the almost miniscule sound he notices her flinch. "She sees me, but she's pretending not too. She likes this game. After all, why would she stand there every night with her curtains slightly parted." Suddenly, he noticed he sounded pathetic almost pleading as if to convince himself he wasn't doing anything wrong. He shook his tousled brown hair, dragged his long fingers across his stubble and sighed.

He threw himself onto his bed and began to sort through his mail eyes darting through the window checking she was still there. Hands trembled as he reached one thick envelope scented in lotus perfume. With a swift movement, he ripped it open and pulled out a card with a tartan material heart on the front. 'To my love' he whispered, breath catching in his throat. 'Till we can be together again'. He pressed it to his lips then proudly placed it on a makeshift mantle next to similarly marked cards. 'Soon' he mused to himself, 'Soon these will be real'. He returned to his perch to continue his adulation from afar. Black out blinds scrolled down, and his eyes followed desperately to catch one last sight of her before they were obscured. He lay back on his bed, head buzzing with thoughts of her giving way to dreams.

The blinds were back up as he watched her get ready for work. She paced back and forth next to a large silver mirror, reflecting the sun onto a cat, as she searched for her shoes. She muttered under her breath before discovering the offending item and with a pet of the tabby she left her room. He jumped into his crumpled work clothes, looked in the mirror and threw his hands through his hair again then soared down the stairs nearly tripping on the last wooden step. 'Shit' he muttered grabbing his work boots and jamming them on his feet ignoring his mother's warning to mind his manners. He was going to miss her if he didn't hurry. Quickly buttering some

toast, he checked out through the yellowing nicotine stained kitchen curtains to match his pace to hers. A cursory glance at a broken mirror hanging crookedly on the wall as he exited the property showed a gaunt stubbly face much older than his baby blue eyes portrayed. Jogging through the knee-high weeds in his front garden he stooped slightly mid stride to snatch up handfuls of dandelions then slowed as he reached the pavement. He mustn't catch up with her just yet. Taking a steady stride, he matched his step behind her, following her leather boots to the bus stop. Once on the bus he carefully positioned himself behind her, so he could smell the scent of her freshly washed hair. Lotus again as he found the bottle in her bin one night. After six stops he followed her off the bus and dawdled on the pavement ignoring passersby as he jostled for position to watch her enter the café she worked at. He left the dandelions on the windowsill, it wouldn't be safe to go in for a while until she was on a break. Instead, the next several hours would be spent loitering like a delinquent in the city square till it was time to follow her home.

Back on the bus it was busier than before, and he couldn't sit behind her anymore. He glared at the couple in his space. How he hated them and their young love. It was nothing to the passion he felt. Once off the bus he dawdled again so she wouldn't see him watch her tired pace home. He watched her move her bins back to her yard from behind a tree and then did the same for his bins. He forgot it was bin day. In the house it was cold and dark again despite the autumn evening haze outside. He pulled the curtains, lit the fires and with a tired drudge he headed upstairs to her bedroom. 'Mum' he said as he knocked on the wood. Creaking open the door the smell was a pungent warm aroma that choked the back of his throat even in the darkness. Hordes of flies buzzed angrily disturbed from their bounty. He went over to the small mound in the bed and reached for the hairbrush on the bedside table. She liked to have her hair brushed in the evening before supper. He carefully brushed but still small clumps came off oozing into his hand, the flesh and hair a dark matt. 'This will not do' he thought thinking of next door.

Tonight, was the night. Outside he dodged a security light and froze when he heard a dog bark a street over. The dark and warmth enveloped him like a womb, crickets pulsing in his ears, it was a good night. Carefully he found the spare key where she left it and slowly he unlocked her door. Despite the similar layout and his sessions peering through her window he still struggled to keep his balance as he teetered forward into the triangle of light formed behind him. Door closed, and the light was

gone, and he would have to find his way by touch. One hand on the wall and one on the bannister he began his ascent pulling his full weight with his arms to remain light on his feet. No creaking tonight. This was different than other nights, the air electric with potential. This night he would go to her and it would all be real. On the landing he paused and looked at his calloused hand shaking with anticipation on her door handle. Pushing open the door he caught his breath as inch by inch her room unfolded in front of him, shadow of a dresser, blinds and then her bed.