

Shards

Ann Newbegin.

First I remove her hair and then her clothes.

This is what I do.

Dislocating her left arm with a click, I lift it up and wrench it off. Then I place my right hand around her waist and slide the other between her legs. I lift her up and off the metal spike that impales her foot.

This is what I do.

I gather her disembodied limbs into a neat pile in the corner of the window. I lay her torso flat and leave for my coffee break. As I walk through the store, her wide-eyed stare regards the world outside; all those people whose footsteps speed up in comedy and slow down in mourning.

I pad barefoot across grey carpet; the pleasing, narcotic fumes of methylated spirits catching in my throat. Jamie, one of the floor staff, a bone-thin girl tottering on the thick heels of platform boots, tips the purple fluid onto a J cloth. Noddy Holder is singing, *So Here it is Merry Christmas* from the hidden speakers, encouraging shoppers to trail their fingers along rails and buy the glitter.

The slow sliding of hangers, the chattering of anonymous shop-girls and the heat descending from spotlights wraps around me quadraphonically.

I'm opening a door marked STAFF ONLY, and touch the side of the kettle to check its heat; open the cheap instant coffee tin and dip a dirty spoon into the grains. Then I sit at the Formica table among the brown rings of yesterday's cups, sipping and staring at the hand-written notices pinned

to the flaking walls of the small cigarette-stinking room. I light a cigarette of my own, drawing the smoke into my lungs through pinched lips. I tap the ash onto the edge of an old coffee tin. This is my rehabilitation back into the world - these dismemberments, and this window dressing.

It has been two months since the baby died, and my face is still white with blood loss. The glossy shop girls try their best to include me in their tittle-tattle and the alternative life of Soaps, but I can't laugh, as they do, at penis-shaped chocolates or split crotch panties. I've lost something, my attachment to the ordinary world. I'm alone in the knowledge that terrible things can happen on ordinary days and in mundane places.

Jamie opens the door, bringing her cleaning smells with her. She's got this chocolate-tinted skin and those Bambi-eyes, heavy with the weight of false lashes. Jamie's the same age as me, but I am much older. She sits opposite me and nibbles a polystyrene sheet of unadorned Ryvita with her neat white teeth, leaving a trim of blood-red lipstick with each bite.

"Are you coming over the pub tonight?" she asks me.

Thursday night is pay night. Little brown envelopes containing ticker-tape pay slips, folded notes, and a few clinking coins.

Some Thursday nights I'll join them over the Tavern. We all used to fall out of the shop door together, rich with wages, and then we'd descend into the subterranean world of the pub across the road; down into the world of beery smells and jukeboxes that eternally play *Maggie May*. We usually order bowls of chips whilst dreaming of steak and Black Forest Gateaux. We

share the food, dipping our fingers and thumbs neatly, like drinking birds, as we recite our clichés of calorific guilt.

“Carol and Debbie are coming tonight. Go on, come, it’ll be good, we’ll have a laugh,” Jamie’s telling me.

I know if I keep refusing their invitations, they’ll stop making them.

“I might,” I say.

“Oh go on, we miss you, you make us laugh.”

“I don’t know, last time I only just caught the last bus, I got trapped in the window seat by an old man who put his hand on my leg and asked me if I wanted any business. I didn’t know what he meant. For a minute, I thought he might want me to run a café for him or something.”

I’m trying. I’m really trying hard to be part of things. If I can make them laugh they may forgive my moments of mad desperation. “Carol’s squeezing herself into a pair of my Levis that I’ve worn in the bath to shrink,” Jamie laughs. “We’ll have to lay her on the floor to get the zip up. You’d be good at that.” She snatches the last bite of crisp bread into her mouth and splutters through a mouthful of crisp shards: “Will we see you tonight then?”

“Okay, alright. I’ll see you over there, after we get paid.”

“Great. It’ll be good. You might even enjoy yourself, y’never know. Tarrah a bit.”

I finish my coffee and walk back to the window. I smile at a gingery man staring into the window, tilting his head to get a better view of pert,

fibreglass breasts tipped with red cherries. Sometimes they open their flies to see if I can be shocked in my fish bowl, but he just laughs and expands his cupped hands out from his chest - giving me the *thumbs-up* and a salacious wink - then walks on.

Sometimes I like to stand very still and watch, and then, when I have an audience, I move slightly and they jump backwards in surprise. Plain-faced housewives in Crimplene coats throw back their heads with snorting horse laughter and place their hands on their hearts. They do not expect me to be so real.

It gets dark early in November. Gaudy Christmas lights spark up, the coloured bulbs swinging on power lines that stretch between the cliff-edged buildings that cut holes in the sky. Street lamps cast sodium light over the queues waiting for buses. The surge for home has begun. A newspaper vendor calls out his trademark slur of words as he holds up the Evening Mail, leaning his muffled weight against a box covered in coins. He winks at me. We're joined in our secret world of The Watcher.

The icy cold wind rushes down the High Street, forcing discarded chip wrappers to perform papery aerial ballets, until they fall and congregate like a tangle of Dutch girls' hats in shop doorways.

Tribes of lads in tartan cut-off trousers bump against one another. They shout as they fall off the edges of pavements, and josh each other cruelly about their lack of sexual prowess. Shivering girls in thin coats and mini-skirts link arms and lean into one other, whispering secrets behind their veils of hair while their eyes follow the boys.

At the end of the day I collect my wages from the Manager, Mr Diamond, a man worried by the complexities of female choices; a man hotly embarrassed by underwear. I watch as he places the jingling packets into out-stretched palms, but I'm left waiting. "Sorry, I'd forgot you'd be here today," he tells me, wiping his forehead with the back of his knuckles in a play of exaggerated puzzlement. "Can I see you about it tomorrow? Will that be alright?"

"I haven't got my bus fare home." I'm apologising for being so poor, so badly managed.

Mr Diamond reaches into the trouser pocket of his pinstripe suit; takes out a handful of mixed coins and drops them onto the counter top. I reach out and snatch them up. Since I have no money to buy cider, I collect my coat and walk across the city to my bus stop.

Pigeons pinwheel around the sky, preparing to roost on guano-splodged Victorian ledges. The air reeks of damp, chalky pigeon shit. Masses of Starlings set up a colossal racket of evening whistles, settling on wires and then, agitated, flying up again. The city shrieks with rushing humanity as I walk past the carbonised shell of Snowhill Station and board the bus home.

I open the door to my empty flat. I am on my own tonight; my compulsive rituals of grief are leaving no space for anyone else. I make myself a bowl of Rice Krispies. Then the *snap, crackle and pops* are drowned by the noise of furious banging on my front door.

I answer the knocking and see my neighbour from across the hall, standing there in a fidgety state of agitation. He steps back. We've never spoken; we maintain each other's privacy. We keep our city selves to our city selves. "Don't go into town," he tells me. I'm confused. His hand flies up to pull back a dark curtain of permed hair and, as he's tucking it behind his ear, a ring on his finger flares brilliance. "Don't go into town, there's bombs going off everywhere, it's on the telly." He grabs the stair-rail, and leaps the steps two at a time as I close the door.

*I see amber glasses of cider flying up like quick birds, hanging momentarily, holding the eventual at bay, before shattering and star-bursting. Fried potato snacks tumble from the ceiling like jackstraws. Everything is slow - and then, everything moves at the speed of light, and roars disintegration.*

By morning, New Street is empty of traffic but filled with discarded objects. A surreal scene of melted chairs, glasses and bottles in neat rows among confusions of blankets and clothing. A single, black, high-heel shoe stands at the edge of the debris-tattered road. The pavement crunches and glitters with frosty shards of glass. Council workers push their brooms along briskly. Cold firemen wind their hoses efficiently, and carry misshapen particles of carnage back and fourth. Punctured fabrics, whipped by the tunnelling wind, rattle-snap like so many prayer flags flying from imploded windows. I avoid stepping into the dark pools and strange peninsulas that stain the grey as I walk towards the shop.

The trapped blast roared up from the Tavern in the Town releasing its pent-up burning self into the night. The shop window's blown away. Inside there's only the chattering of new-made ghosts.

I step over the edge of broken glass.

She lays face down, both arms gone, her body blackened and cracked; one leg twisted at a dysfunctional angle; splatters of blood speckling her skin.

I begin to pick up the pieces.

This is what I do.