

Object Permanence

By Madeleine Whitmore

The way she looks is like the way a cicada shell glows at midday. She makes Cat feel like she's woken to find every effigy in every park has been torn down and replaced with a seedling. There is beauty in the dissonance of her ascetic behaviour and the killer outfits she turns up in each day, in the way her voice sounds like eddying a stream and watching the grit clear just beneath the surface. The shock Cat felt upon witnessing her sob violently to *The Office* was unparalleled to any surprise she had ever felt before. It was jarring and uncomfortable, setting such a monstrous dichotomy to Stella's usual act that it felt as though she had seen a part of this girl that was forged deep in some psychic smithy, blistering and bright, something she didn't feel she had the right to see. But it was Stella that had invited her over and Stella that had chosen what to watch, so some part of her felt vaguely smug that she had been allowed to witness something so strange and terrifying. Cat had thought about wiping Stella's tears away with the pad of her thumb, kissing her forehead and squeezing her hand. Of course, all she actually did was perch awkwardly on the end of the sofa and offer Stella some water, even though she had no idea where the glasses were kept.

Now, Cat sits in the laundrette, watching the machine toss her bedsheets in dizzying circles. She always brings something to read but finds the repetitive motion of the flying soap and cotton so comforting she sometimes spends an hour just watching her washing go round and round. Sometimes she thinks about Stella, imagines what she'd say to her if she happened to walk through the door with a basket of... clothes? Sheets? No, she saw Stella's family had a washing machine under the worktop in their kitchen. Shopping? Yes, a string bag full of shopping. She'd be walking past and spy Cat through the window, run in happily. They'd spend the rest of the day eating sugary peaches straight out of the tin. Of course, if Stella did catch sight of Cat, she'd probably keep walking. Cat couldn't blame her; she's not much fun to be around.

Anyway, it's a while before Cat realises the spin cycle has finished and there's a queue forming behind her. She gathers the damp sheets and stumbles over to her basket, her vision swimming with pink phosphenes. She's never questioned her sudden vision losses; it's disturbing now she thinks about it, these axioms embedded in her brain that she should perhaps investigate instead of just shrug off as low-blood pressure or an undiagnosed anxiety disorder. She spends the rest of the day deliberating over whether or not to call her GP but decides against it; Stella is still swimming through her cerebral ether and she doesn't want the surgery's hold music to disturb the warm, comforting effect this is having on her, just as how she sometimes puts off getting up after a particularly vivid dream.

Cat goes to the corner shop and buys a tin of peach slices in case Stella has a crisis and all other friends and family are unavailable to her and she just happens to be craving sugared fruit. The chances are low but Cat likes to think if she gives it a nudge, the universe might return something to her, like a galactic favour.

The pain in Stella's tooth is reaching crescendo. She presses the knot of gauze harder into her gum but instead of numbing the pain the added pressure merely causes another sticky drip of blood to fall down the back of her throat. She gags slightly, steadying herself with her free hand against the kitchen table. Luke's gone out to pick up more painkillers so she's disgustingly, devastatingly alone in the house. She lets her eyes relax, the metropolis stagnating in front of her as she stares out the window. A crow sways on the edge of the drainpipe opposite. She lets herself study it for a moment; the almost granular texture of its

feathers, the sickly ochre eye. Then another throb of pain shoots through her lower gum and she gasps, her fingers stiff and sore from holding the cotton in place.

Stella could have coped with wisdom teeth, she's sure they wouldn't have been a huge barrier in the downwards spiralling trajectory of her life, just sitting quietly in her mouth. Leaving them there certainly wouldn't have made anything worse. But no, they had to be wrenched out lest they 'become impacted and put strain on the other molars' in the future. So really she's being kind to herself by taking them out. She just wishes this form of self-care wasn't quite so excruciatingly painful.

She wishes everything wouldn't come quite so early in her life. Anxiety when she was eleven. Dog died the following year, a day after she got her period. All grandparents gone before she turned fourteen. And now wisdom teeth which, at seventeen, are apparently 'unusually premature'. Everything in her life has been unusually premature Stella feels, although she struggles to conjure up specific examples of this. She's meant to be going out this evening, she got a text from Cat asking her over for '*supper or something, idk. we can do whatever <3*'. Cat's lovely. Maybe she'll tell her about the grandparents-dead-dog-period-disaster-year but frame it as black humour, something she regularly pulls out to make new girls laugh. Because Cat is new, newer than she is; new in the way that she joined the college without knowing anyone in the year, new in that her skin under lamplight looks raw and crimson like fresh fruit, new in that she recently started appearing, in various hallucinatory forms, in Stella's Prozac-induced lucid dreams. Maybe she'll tell her about those (it's usually Stella doing the talking), specifically about the one in which Cat turns up to her house in the middle of the night having cycled to the supermarket at 2 am to do Stella's shopping for her. This is a recurring one; sometimes it's pouring with rain and Cat's hair is plastered to her face, sometimes it's summer and the sky is bright grey because in her subconscious Stella is apparently living in Iceland where the sun doesn't set. But, whatever the weather, Cat always rings the doorbell, grins and hands her the bags. She never opens them in the dream, just watches Cat cycle off into the distance, the horizon blurring with the crack in her bedroom ceiling as she begins to wake up.

But she won't be able to go over if Luke doesn't return soon with some prescription stuff. She tries to boil the kettle one-handed and then realises they've run out of straws so she couldn't drink anything, hot or cold, even if she actually wanted to. Stella's not even sure why they had been in possession of straws in the first place. Then there's a loud banging sound that makes her jolt and dislodge another sticky blood clot from the cavity in her gum. Wincing, she unlocks the door clumsily to find Luke hadn't managed to get the painkillers as 'the pharmacy doesn't open on bank holidays.'

Cat gets Stella's message at seven.

can u come over here? been to the dentist, armageddon happening in my mouth.

Then –

don't suppose you've got anything stronger than paracetamol?

She's biked over within the hour. Stella answers the door, the left side of her face swollen like an over-ripe pear. Cat has a morbid fascination with skin, the way it blotches and reddens, tender like blossom. Maybe she just has a fascination with Stella's skin. She's mapped in her mind each freckle constellation on the bridge of her nose; she thinks about telling Stella this but then reminds herself she's known this girl all of five weeks. Instead she gives her a tentative hug and some pills she took from the kitchen cupboard.

Stella's too spacey to cook anything so Cat heats up some spaghetti hoops in the microwave and watches, wincing, as she tries to slurp them up using one side of her mouth. They watch the Judge Judy marathon on Channel 5. Stella insists on watching it with French audio because she firmly believes, she says (her voice muffled), that her mind will be able to supernaturally comprehend a language she is not fluent in if given enough visual context and then store this divine knowledge somewhere in her psyche for future use. Cat firmly believes that this logic is flawed, but just smiles quietly.

There's still some light coming in through the sitting room shutters, casting a strange, ethereal glow over Cat's features. She's just one of those people that suits sunlight, Stella thinks. She's not entirely sure who those people are. Cat's beauty is familiar to her, comfortable even. But something about her delicacy – the way the bridge of her nose curves slightly so the rays highlight a small, shiny spot in the middle – something about this worries her, as though Cat only exists when she is within Stella's periphery. She feels completely sure that as soon as the door closes behind her later, she'll just cease to exist. Each time the three dancing dots come up on their message feed, she's here again. Then the message buzzes through, and she's gone. Stella knows this isn't the case but the idea of it makes her want to cry.

She tries not to think about Cat not existing and turns her attention back to the TV.

Tu penses quoi, la? C'est pas difficile.

Ce mec, il ment! Je vous promets-

Ca suffit.

Some domestic drama, maybe a divorce case. Stella lets her vision relax again, the lamp light splitting into glittering rays. Cat has moved almost imperceptibly closer to her on the sofa, so quietly and unobtrusively that Stella thinks she's imagined it. But no, Cat twitches and her elbow brushes Stella's side. If she wasn't still holding the gauze to her mouth, she'd reach out and take her hand. She tries to extricate her arm from their position but subtlety has never come easy to her; as she switches the gauze from one hand to the other, a drop of blood lands on Cat's lap. They watch it seep through the cotton fibres of the denim, expanding slowly outwards, a small scarlet lake in the sky. Then Cat takes Stella's hand quietly and asks her if she wants anything to drink.

They stare at their hands, knotted together between them. Stella can't tell whose is who's; she thinks if something touched Cat's fingers she'd feel it in her own.

Ovaltine, please.

Okay.

Their hands part and Cat gets up gently, smoothing down the seat of her jeans. She doesn't look at Stella as she turns but her small, peaceful smile makes Stella sure she'll still exist even after she disappears around the doorframe.