

A STORY IN NINE ROOMS

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

1

You begin in the lovely oval room, the red walls carved and smooth and swift as marble. It is dark, the walls pulse, the strong heartbeat above is almost oppressive. When do you first hear it, and think, I wish they'd shut that off? Is it when you hear those other soft offerings, shadow sounds cast quickly around in some wider world? The sounds are tempting but you are scared. You wrap yourself in ropes so tight that when you are evicted, it is forceful, and hands cleave you free. Your mother hears no scream of protest. She is asleep, in her own dark, doorless room. She wakes up eventually and holds you, but in some ways she will always be locked to you. You will spend your life sneaking close to her room, knocking, manipulating, wishing only to invade. You want to shine a light into every mystery of your mother, puncture each one with light until her secrets are nothing but trinkets, desires so ancient they are meaningless, could belong to anyone, even you.

2

Your next home is a small, cosy bed, a bed you have to be tricked into every night by your mother. A bed with bars. And perhaps the first feeling you remember is clutching those bars and believing things would be better if you could climb over them, into the possibilities of the room beyond. You always want to be awake, opening a door you are too small to open.

3

You share a room with your brother. He is quiet during the day, but when it is dark, he very seriously asks you to hold a torch from the top bunk. You encircle him carefully in light, while he mimes Frank Sinatra, and your parents sleep, as distant and oblivious as your neighbours next door.

4

And then your brother moves, first to the other side of the room and then beyond the wall. And somehow in this move you are unbound from each other, separated as though you had once been conjoined.

5

You live in a yellow room, a blue room, a pink room. You are obsessed with the names of paint samples at the DIY store, and you slip them into your pocket like a thief. *Silent purple. Silver dollar. Breeze blue.* Each colour seems to promise the possibility of a new life, a new room, but you learn your choice does not matter because every colour is the same in the dark. You have learned enough words that the unfamiliar voices on the radio, on the television, begin to coalesce into stories you recognise. You realise fairy tales are pretty tricks that have already taught you horror. And you begin to understand the word stranger, and the word trust, and the meaning behind your mother's words. *Do not answer the door when we are out, never go near a man who says he has candy.* You live in a bungalow and you grow scared of the dark, even though you are a big girl, no longer a child. Your mother tells you to stay in your room. You lay awake at night, listening for movement at the window, and even in your dreams, you cannot leave the room. When you open the door, ready to run, there are bars, or a giant hand, spilling candy above your head like a terrifying, tempting pinata.

6

You start spending as much time as possible in other girls' beds. You discover that drinking makes you less afraid of being kidnapped, and you love to sleep beside someone. You are full of an all-encompassing joy that you have not felt since your brother moved beyond the wall. You are finally no longer lonely. You and the girls you fall in love with grow wild with your power, your cohesion, your endless discovery of each other. You groom each other like monkeys. You care about every hair in the other's eyebrows, plucking them fiercely, until you almost make each other ugly, but you do not admit this. You always, always, call each other beautiful. Your bedrooms are messy with each other's discarded clothes, smudges the colour of skin on every

surface. You cover yourself in the scent of dead flowers and dance wildly, but when you are beyond your rooms, you are so careful with your movements that you barely move at all. You raise your non-existent eyebrows, roll your eyes, speak in whispers because you like the way it brings people close to you, so close you could almost kiss them, but you do not.

7

Leave your childhood bedroom and live in a series of stark and dirt-lined rooms where mice scratch inside the walls. Burn a hole in your single bed because once you are drunk and leave your hairdryer on beneath your sheets like a heater. Bring boys up to your bedroom and present the hole like a museum exhibit. Laugh maniacally. Some boys, the kind who were loved by their mothers, look concerned. Others, the ones you like, laugh with you, and then leave before the light hits the window. You do not mind. You are insatiable for bodies and all the strange things they say and do. Nothing hurts you because you are too curious to be hurt. You do things so you can talk to girls about them while eating toast, and when there is no boy to bring to your bed, you find the nearest girl's to get into, and giggle your way into sleep.

8

Fall in love with a boy who admires the hole, then goes with you to buy a new mattress. He says one word for every dozen of yours, and he says them slowly while you are always rushing along, throwing your words out like apple cores from a car window. Spend every night together and perform a choreography of sleep, a ballet of intertwining. Wake with a happiness inside your heart that can only lend itself to metaphors that belong in children's books, hot air balloons, yellow suns in sunglasses. You cannot believe how lucky you are to have this body beside you, the only effective resistance you have ever found against bad thoughts. All you have ever wanted is to be close to something undeniably alive when night falls, when the dark emphasises the wardrobe's deadness, the side table's deadness, the lamp's deadness, the book's deadness, everything dead except the quick, quiet spiders you imagine are waiting to crawl down your throat.

You are so warm that you grow hot and start to sweat. You feel like you are baking, rising up like a sweet, soft cake. You have never believed in or wanted softness or sweetness. At a restaurant you once worked in, they reused the leftover dollops of butter from people's bread baskets to bake the daily cakes. One day in summer, a cake was cut for a child's birthday, a pink monstrosity of sprinkles and meringue, and in the first exquisite slice, there was a perfectly preserved cigarette butt in the top sponge layer. You remember the crying child, the image of the cigarette bleeding ash into a layer of cream and jam, how hard it was to hold your laughter in until after the shift, when you and your co-workers drank beers until the sun rose. All anyone had to do was light a cigarette for you all to lose it again with laughter. It was such a true thing, in the way a joke has to be true to be funny, and has to be both ugly and beautiful to be true. You stop sleeping. You love the boy but for the first time in your life you wish you were away from his aliveness, held only your own close. You think of the oppressive heartbeat in the very first room, your mother. You are terrified. You hear the old kidnapper noises at the window, at the door, and even though you are scared, you almost want them to enter, so you could lift the dead lamp and smash it down into pieces, dividing one day irreversibly from the next.

9

You are alone in a single bed. Everything is broken and you do not know how to fix anything. The light bulb sputters, dims. The sink in the bathroom drips. You collect paint samples and smudge the walls with a hundred possible colours. The walls are thin and all around you can hear the faint sounds of life, of people moving and stretching and breathing and holding onto each other tight. You have spent your whole life trying not to be alone. Outside of the open window, a fat pigeon sits on a telephone wire, its eye a black bead, and you watch it, carefully, imagining its frantic, tiny, precious heart. You laugh loudly, thrilled to observe without distraction, and immediately startle the bird away beyond your reach.

Dizz Tate is a fiction writer living in Birmingham. Her first novel, Brutes, will be published by Faber and Catapult in 2023.