Gargoyle

English, cockney at that, the squadron of children are killers with their foreign tongues. A new school for the American... At seven, she understands scarcely a word of what they say.

The man in the black suit is her father. The taxi is black too, spinning away from the white-columned splendor of Belgravia to the dusty local school. The taxi door opens, and she is expelled. She looks back at her father—the rippling expanse of him pressing into the seat springs. He says nothing, of course, no goodbye, merely clicks the door shut and turns to the driver.

"11 Cornhill," he says.

The driver gives a sharp nod. Slowly the cab begins to move off. She stands on the pavement, watching her father's impassive face facing front. He is looking at the back of the driver's capped head**,** noticing with disdain the tattiness of the herringbone rim.

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Three years later, sporty in his tweed jacket and black turtleneck, the father takes the family out for a jaunt in Hyde Park, the white dog rasping for breath as it drags the ten-year-old girl forth. She watches her father peruse his world—his street, his doorman at the Carlton Hotel, his Sketchley Cleaners, his greengrocer—watches him peruse all this and sees that he feels pretty good, pretty damn perky to be owner, keeper of all. The worst part, though, is what he has on his head... The adopted garb of that first cabbie. An idea borrowed, then tried, inspected in front of a shop mirror, purchased—the horror of it always how fast he makes a thing his.

He walks down Sloane Street, the cap on his head. Pulled forth by the white dog, the girl glances back every now and then to check his pace, to keep her mother in sight; to throw out a thread—her glance—that will attach her to her mother, while she, traitorous, is with him. Walking, the girl listens to the sound of her own heels on the pavement. She smells this London she has come to love.

"What does it smell like?" she asks the dog. "I couldn't begin to tell you," she answers for it. "Even though I have nostrils the size of grapefruits!"

There seems to the girl so very much rank to smell in her own house, underneath her very own nose, that when out in *her* London—*her* street, *her* Sketchley Cleaners, *her* doorman at the hotel, *her* greengrocer (you see, it is a war!), when out in *her* London, she wants only to smell the city in... Now she crosses the road at the balesha beacons, her little black shoe permitted to land only on the white stripes of the zebra crossing. She crosses so as to walk beside the Sketchley, to smell the clean airy laundry-mothering smell of whatever they do inside—to look in at the plumpish ladies, their comforting

forearms sorting and sifting, tagging clothes, smiling a sad-happy smile at the business executive, the personal secretary, the housewife... She crosses the road to watch these ladies of Sketchley, even—especially—when they turn their backs, tossing the dirty, just-delivered clothes into different bins. There's something sad about the way they turn, their aprons knotted behind. Something sad about what they do that makes the girl watch, that makes her think they'll be different, altered, when they turn back. She always waits for the change, stands at the counter smelling in the steamy dry cleaning fog, and always when a lady turns back she looks at the girl with the same sad-happy face, the same wry look, the same smile. She says the same thing as she said before: "Righto, dearie, Thursday afternoon then. Mind you don't forget your stubb..." And the world would have turned on its axis a degree or a half... Music would have been played, hands would have paused an inch above piano keys—a mother's hands, white with clenching fear... A girl would have played with a dog in a park, flowers would have been bought, arranged in a vase, beauty made... And still, the world turning a degree or a half on its axis would have caused that lady to change—barely—scarcely detectably—but the girl awaited it, saw it, sensed it, and so was given reason to know that this life changes by half degrees, seconds of pause, intervals between things: plump comforting cleaning arms never the same from one half degree to the next. Never the same, though in this she seems privy to some piece of knowledge she should not have. The Sketchley lady doesn't know it; the handsome top-hatted doorman either; but her mother—oh, when she looks into the girl's green eyes (her own, deep brown, aching), *she* knows, her mother *does* know—a look fleets between them, living for an instant, then vanishes.

In this way, daily, the girl makes the world hers. She walks the dog. Hans Crescent, Pavilion Road, walking the cobbled circuit, the white dog rasping at the collar, ready, always ready—sniffing, digging, licking, looking even out of blind impossible eyes. Daily, the girl takes deep possession of this world. *She* knows the fit of the key in the park gate lock. Knows the candle tree, the green cab rank, the smell of sausage and egg, the talk of different men coming through smells of food; knows each dog who walks its master in the park, the crack in the pavement beside the gate; knows the bus stop there, the shelter, the queues, the tired eyes peering at her with musty interest as she approaches; knows the few smiles at the dog, the sniffs of the dog at unfamiliar legs.

So why does her father, on a Sunday, in his cap—with his wife, his tweed jacket, his black turtleneck—with his full tummy, his child, his dog—why does *he* walk the road as though it were his? As though *he* knows Doctor Lawson and the westie Pippa; knows C.E. Leete, the purveyor of meat; as though *he* has touched the greengrocer's deformed hand: five healthy fingers and a bud that never grew?

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Later, the father sits in his plaid bathrobe in the living room, against the plush red cushions of a velvet sofa. Facing into the room, he is framed against windows looking on to the park. Outside: kind London. Inside: a kind of seeping, suffusing death. The large Chubb key clicks in the lock downstairs, and the lift cables groan—even the lift reluctant to take a child Up There. Third floor. Maisonette. The parents always tell it this way: "We have a third floor maisonette. That's two stories, you understand. Two floors. A

beautiful winding staircase. Our own Victorian gargoyles too. For protection," they always joke.

The girl herself prefers what lies beneath. "On the second floor," she says to strangers at bus stops, bank queues, etc., "we have Lord and Lady Gordon. Lord Adam is treasurer to the Queen Mother... Then on the first floor are the Kingsbury's. Their son Ramsey's rather a sissy. There's no-one on the ground floor, but in the dungeon is Sir William. Not a real Sir," she concedes. "The caretaker. From Yorkshire."

Inside the flat ("the maisonette," she mimicks), rich Chinese carpets abound, woven of silk, fringed at the ends. During the past three years in London, the mother and father have acquired impeccable taste.

The father sits and smokes. A cup of coffee. Hairy ankle and calf. His face: a faint disgust hovering about—exactly which feature is it? Mouth? Eyes? Not quite bulbous nose? The girl cannot quite tell.

Trying to avoid her father's gaze as she walks past the living room, she stings with a revulsion she takes to be normal. A normal evil of life. No one ever seems interested in what she could tell about him.

They've a bathroom downstairs which she must pass as she walks through the hallway. The crimson bathroom is a friend. Sink, toilet, pull chain—all are red. In a dream she has, someone chucks a bucket of blood at the wall. It is her job to scrub it, but the stain will not disappear. Stubborn, it stays: a room that tells the truth. The house she lives in is a shuddering place. Inside this house the truth gets slain. So, for relief, she goes to the crimson place, locks the door. She slides her back down the wall and rests. It is

tiring to live in a family such as this, a family in which so much she sees and feels, so much she knows must go unsaid. Exhausting, the effort to conceal... It often drives her to a habit she deplores. Spells of crying leave her eyes as red as the room.

Eventually, though, she must get up; she cannot take refuge in here for too long, or her father will come pounding on the door. For her father everything must be open: his mouth; the doors; his access to her. So eventually she has to unlock the door. Walk through the hallway. She knows she will see him as she passes the living room door. She will have to say “Hi, Dad,” and shiver with the pain of forcing up these words.

Sofa-bound, her father exposes his hairy calf through a part in the plaid robe. He looks at her.

“Hi, Dad.” She smiles.

He doesn’t answer. Expels smoke through his nose and mouth. Frills surround his head.

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Upstairs, there are two bathrooms. The girl’s is green, but it has no pigeons outside, and the towel bars yield nothing but whistling air when bled. Only the blue bathroom, her parents’, has pigeons. And towel bars that actually get hot. You have to use a key to bleed them. You turn this key and the rack starts clanging, spluttering, belching, then spurts forth a spray of water, a perfect little specimen that arcs into the air, to be caught by the girl in the bathroom cup, white with London lime. It takes time, but eventually the bars get warm.

The windows in here are frosted, and outside is a dark courtyard, a mysterious enclosure behind a cluster of buildings whose exact location she can never figure out. The pigeons own this space. She stands washing her face, cutting a nail, cleaning her ear, when suddenly a misty form appears at the window—a pigeon looking in at her. A wing flaps, a beak touches glass. The girl presses her nose to the pane, at beak level. It is even worse up close though: all she sees are shadowy beads of frosted glass. Turning to the mirror, she stares at her own face: white skin, freckles, marine-green eyes.

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Her father still sits in the living room. Sits in the red velvet corner with London framed behind him: a man's balding head against a background of imprisoning screen.

Her mother washes laundry, her back to the kitchen, the world, her daughter. Her arms are busy, her not yet jubbly arms doing a sad thing always, the sadness of laundry on a Sunday: the rhythmic churning of water and soap, the drying, sorting, folding. The back of a mother whose arms move to some mournful inner melody. Today she wears trousers and a large shirt for comfort. Her hair is short, dark. Folding the family's clothes, her arms move up and down, back and forth in this place called washing clothes.

The girl passes by the living room door. It's afternoon, a Sunday. She's already forced up two greetings to her father, the last of which just half an hour earlier, so she has a certain license now to walk past the door without a word, seeking out her mother.

"Mama?" she says, peering into the narrow space. "Come to the park with me. I want to show you something. The candle tree is blooming."

Her mother turns, casts her a weary look.

"I have work," she says. "You see this pile? Who will do these clothes if I leave them?"

Outside the cramped laundry space the pigeons are present too. It's not true, the girl thinks, what they say about pigeons being filthy, spreading disease. They eat orange lentils out of your hand; you give them names like Teddy Roosevelt and Marie Antoinette. They are always outside the cleanest rooms.

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In the late afternoon, her father strays from the sofa into the kitchen. Putting his arms into the fridge, he clangs around until he comes out with tongue, great lashes of tongue that he slaps between bread and carries off to his bedroom. Belly full, he naps. It starts softly enough, the sound that comes from his mouth, yet the "cack-cack" swiftly becomes a man's snore. His door is open. There he lies, his robe fallen open, a strawberry red birthmark peeping from his Y-fronts.

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Her mother turns around in the narrow laundry space. Looking at her child, she says: “Where’s your father?” Her face is a sag of sadness and fear.

“Asleep.”

They are forever waiting for the sleep of the father.

Her mother looks relieved now, yet somehow bewildered, marooned.

“When did he go up?” she asks.

There is so much vigilance necessary!

Her mother says: “Has he been asleep for long?”

The girl understands the real question. How much time do we have? How much before he wakes, groggy, irascible, and we must all take cover?

Rooms will be entered then, doors closed.

For the moment though, the girl keeps her mother company in the cramped space of the laundry. She makes the best of it. Because not very long from now, she will be waiting inside a room with pussy cats and stripes on the wall. A garret room with a single twin bed. Lying on it, the white dog breathing by her side, she will stare out a narrow window. Her eyes will sweep beyond the gargoyle posted there—beyond the scales and wings and open-mouthed snarl—to where the London sky sits more lightly on other roofs, other lives.