

THIS IS WHAT SHE IS DOING NOW

An extract from The Cremation Project, shortlisted for the inaugural Fitzcarraldo Editions Novel Prize and longlisted for the USA Dzanc Fiction Prize.

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A

A blue colouring pencil.

A blue plastic bag

A bobbin wound with copper wire.

A bodice, JPG, size 12.

A bottle of Thierry Mugler After Shave.

A bowl.

A corner cut from a linen tablecloth, used as a rag.

A crumpled sheet of toilet paper.

A Davidoff cigarette tip with torn paper trail.

A grey T-shirt, armpits stained and smelling of sweat.

A jar of Liquitex Acrylic: titanium white.

A left foot Cesare Paciotti insole.

A linen tea towel with a fleur-de-lis motif, a present from his grandmother.

A matchbook from a restaurant, Manus et Janette's: Spécialités des Poissons et des Crustacés.

~~A note which read *you naughty man*.~~

A pack of Gouache Fine Professionnelle, 150ml.

A pack of Oscilloccinum.

A pair of knee-length, grey Gant socks.

A pair of men's tights, thick, black, soft.

A pair of silk socks: one dark brown, the other faded.

A piece of moulded grey plastic.

A pot of fast dry enamel paint, left over from an artwork they made together.

A pot of pink glitter.

A pubic hair.

A right foot shoe, Cesare Paciotti, burgundy patent leather slip-on with pointed toe and lace-up detail.

A roach end.

A set of joke shop teeth, fat molars protruding from bubble-gum-pink gums.

A small, white, cotton pillowslip.

A Zippo wick, unused.

Alix

Alix gets a roll of black bin bags

~~Alix watched the lascivious curl of his lips as he read the note.~~

Alix holds them up.

Alix would have felt too self-conscious to wear something like that.

Another

Another right foot shoe, also Paciotti: black leather slip-on, with pointed toe, a silver buckle, and weave detail.

As

As she comes alongside the wall she sees that they've been tossed back into the garden.

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Carter

~~Carter used to do this, in their attic flat.~~

Champagne

Champagne corks.

Did

Did Thérèse wear the corset?

Drizzle

Drizzle mists the window.

Had

Had the packages arrived on the same day, he would have put the T-shirt on, walked into the kitchen without pants, used the tea towel to dry some cups, and made a coffee.

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He

~~He had two pairs: a scratchy woollen pair, with lace-up fly, and a dirty white ribbed cotton pair with a regular fly.~~

He knew how to live, she thinks, with his perfume, his designer clothes, his fish restaurants.

~~He knew where his parents kept their porn stash.~~

~~He played rugby at school.~~

~~He wore long johns when they met.~~

~~He would pour the cold coffee into a pan, add milk, heat it up slowly, and pour it into hot chocolate bowls, red for her, blue for him.~~

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Her

Her coffee is cold.

Her friend is leaving.

Her heart thuds

Her instinct is to throw the pants away.

His

His name painted on in black brushstrokes.

His stuff, sent over by the gallery after he died.

In

In the cellar, she pulls out the over-sized Habitat bag from underneath the stairs.

In the past she was the person taking the pictures.

In the third box she finds a pair of pink fairy wings.

Inside

Inside, a large piece of scrunched up canvas.

Is

Is it possible for one person to be a home?

It

It has been in storage all these years at a friend's studio.

Its

Its heel is heavily scuffed.

It is

It is light but large and awkward.

It is date-stamped: 19 04 94.

Items

Items totalling 4,000 euros at JPG.

Jean

Jean will be home from school soon.

Lengths

Lengths of coloured chain attached to pieces of paper with the name of the colour handwritten in French, samples from when he changed supplier.

-

Maybe

Maybe Thérèse did too, and wore it anyway.

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Men's

Men's or women's?

Of course

Of course, she thinks, it's too late, they're no good to anyone.

One

One day, walking home, she can't see them.

~~One night, drunk and naked, he fell on top of his parents in bed.~~

Rain

Rain.

Receipts

Receipts, information cards, hotel brochures, hotel slippers, links of chain, toilet roll centres, used razors, used toothbrushes, half-empty toothpaste tubes, screwed up bits of paper.

Seven

Seven artist brushes, their handles smeared with paint.

She dumps

She dumps the Habitat bag in the cellar.

She dumps them in the green wheelie bin.

She

~~She always marvelled at his capacity to ping from being a man receiving a T-shirt with an embroidered cock on it, to a man receiving a linen tea towel; how he wore each personality without any sense of duplicity.~~

She balls them up and replaces them into the bench seat.

She can't decide what to do with the wings.

She digs into the stew.

She doesn't like perfume, or jewellery, or make up.

She flips open the bench seat lid, and finds a pair of stiletto-heeled boots, size 5, a moth-eaten silk kimono and a pair of sheer men's pants.

She found it unusual, exotic.

She grew up in an abstemious household.

She holds them between her right forefinger and thumb.

She imagines the bulge of his cock as he parades and poses, filming himself, or having Thérèse or someone else take pictures of him.

~~She liked how it looked on him.~~

She looks at one of the receipts.

She lowers the box onto the concrete slab.

She makes a pot of coffee, and returns to the cellar.

She picks the pants out and holds them up.

She piles the other three large boxes on top of each other in the garden.

She places the wings on the low wall at the front of her house, where she routinely leaves things out for people to take.

She pours the coffee into a pan, adds milk, and warms it up.

She presses it to her nose.

She puts it in the washing machine.

She rams the nylon bag into a nook in the kitchen.

She retrieves them, muddy and torn, a snag has become a hole.

She scores the crucifix of red and white FRAGILE vinyl tape with a scalpel.

She slides the bench, stools and striped bag into the cellar.

She stares at the boxes in the garden, caved in by rain.

She sticks her hand in again and pulls out a black T-shirt with white stitching.

She stuffs the canvas and the items from the first box into the bin bag.

She thinks about the meal at Manus et Janette's.

She wants to take each item in turn, consider it, and re-box it, whilst she decides what to do with it.

She will need to cook.

She wraps her arms around the top box and lifts it down.

She has

She has bought a pack of twelve, small and stackable.

She has the bag on the floor at her feet, her back to the metal stairs.

~~She had only ever seen men wearing long johns in Cowboy movies.~~

She has to collect.

She is

She is hungry.

~~She is reminded of a T-shirt he received in the post, from a girl he made a film with, on which the girl embroidered the outline of a cock and projectile drops of cum.~~

She is being healthy.

She opens

She opens out an archive box.

She opens the bench seat, and looks at the wings.

She opens the brown soggy flaps.

She opens the lid and sniffs.

She opens three of the sent over boxes, and stuffs the contents into a huge Habitat bag.

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She takes

She takes down a second box, and cuts through the tape.

She takes them into the cellar, and stuffs them into the bench.

She was

~~She was there when the girl called.~~

~~She was with him when he bought it.~~

The

The bathroom door rattles in its frame

The bench, ugly, diminutive, further crowds the kitchen.

The box is half-empty.

The edges of the box dig into her biceps as she presses it against her chest and face.

The first item is a shiny silver package that leaks pink pigment.

~~The girl was 20 to his 35.~~

The higher he ascended the pointier his shoes became.

The pants, the boots, the torn kimono, have a whiff of seediness, like the pervasive chemical drift of coke, which invaded him.

The perfume is in her nostrils.

The seams accentuated his wide shoulders and lean torso.

The stuff invades her house for weeks.

The T-shirt is full of holes.

The toe and heel are worn.

The wings sit on the wall for days.

There

There's no label on the bag, but the contents have a pleasing pliability.

They

They also smell of perfume.

They're covered in bits of dust.

~~They carried him, corpse-like, back to his bed.~~

~~They did that once, when they were first together, ran around wearing just T-shirts in a friend's apartment which they were flat sitting.~~

They glow with toxicity, along with the stiletto-heeled boots and the nude pants.

They look homemade.

~~They sat on upturned milk crates either side of a tiny oak table salvaged from the Greenwich gasworks, and ate cream cakes from the Italian patisserie down the road.~~

This

This is what she is doing now.

Two

Two packs of Dextropropoxyphene Paracetamol Biogram.

Wolford

Wolford, size small.

When

~~When they were together he wore steel toe cap boots, trainers, and latterly, Church's brogues.~~

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Who

Who was there?

Why

Why does she find it so abhorrent?

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Wow

~~Wow, she thought, when he told her, wow.~~

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Yet

Yet he's dead and she's alive.