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**Knight, Lania (2016) Crowded City, Tuesday. Quiddity, 9 (1). pp. 28-30.**

Official URL: <http://quidditylit.com/?p=2064>

EPrint URI: <http://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/5350>

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## Crowded City, Tuesday

As the shuttered windows glow and the street noises rise, Caroline lingers beneath the covers, a strand of her long dark hair twisted in a tight curl round her finger. She watches Daniel sleep, her eyes drifting to the items lining the walls of Isabella's room, a kind friend who has let Caroline borrow a real bed behind a real door so Caroline can sleep with Daniel.

Must you sneak? Caroline's father would say. He'd be standing at the edge of his overgrown allotment, his arms loaded with butternut squash in the shape of elongated buttons, noses, and bulbous toes. He is handsome? He is kind?

Maybe Caroline cannot do this, not yet. Too soon after Thomas, who stalked her when she said Enough. So sudden, Thomas said, his tight fist clutched in her hair.

I'm saying no, she'd said, and she'd looked for a flat.

Then one day in the office Daniel touched her on the shoulder, and she said yes.

Caroline talked to Isabella, who, though kind, is also a bit nervous, re-tying her scarf, eyes always darting away. Would you want to swap flats? Caroline asked. Just for the night?

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Daniel wakes, the pipes clanging, Caroline humming in the shower. He reaches for the panties on the drying rack and holds them to his nose. Lavender. He smells Caroline on his fingertips and then remembers, again, these are not Caroline's panties.

This is Isabella's room, Isabella's closet module in the corner, scarves, sundresses and hats hanging from hooks on the wall. It's as if he's sleeping with two women, and he's forgotten. He's only met Isabella once and can't remember if her eyes are blue or brown.

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In another part of the city, Isabella slips from Caroline's sofa bed, folds it, sets the pillows in place and is quiet so as not to wake Caroline's flatmate, a tall woman who works late nights.

In the mirror perched above the sink, which is cluttered with jewelry and statuettes and half-melted candles, Isabella applies liquid black liner, a perfect arc above her lashes like her mother taught her. The brush curves just beyond her lid, a gentle stroke up and out. She holds a pendant to her lips then tucks it under her scarf. A stray black tear escapes the edge of her eye, and she wipes it with a ripped piece of toilet tissue. She adjusts her scarf, refastens the clip in her hair and tugs at her mother's necklace. Robin's egg blue, a color not unlike the paisley cotton shirt Daniel was wearing last week when Caroline introduced him. Isabella touches the pendant again, unsure, wondering what her mother would think, and decides to leave it out, hanging, just beneath the scarf.

On her bicycle to work, Isabella sees a man in a black jacket and black trousers with wavy black hair like Daniel's stepping into a portable toilet on a construction site. It can't be him. Traffic swirls beside her and sweeps her forward—she can't keep looking back.

All morning, Isabella will hunch in her cubicle, translating an absent officemate's work. No one will sit with her at lunch. She'll take her sandwich outside, even though the bench will be cold. A little sparrow will hop to her fingers, pecking at the breadcrumbs Isabella offers. This will remind her of her mother. The other birds will wait, shy, only pecking at the bread Isabella tosses in the bushes.

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Daniel will be arriving at work in time to see his boss's blinds swing across the window near the top of the door. The slam comes first, then the swish, swish. Daniel smells Caroline, damp from her morning shower, on his wrist. He was inside her one minute, entering the metro the next.

It happens so fast—he can barely make sense of it all.

In the night, when he woke to strange noises of traffic – strange because it wasn't *his* traffic – he stared at Isabella's clothes in the shadows. The closet module in the corner. Her lacy, pretty things. He smelled lavender and rosemary, lifted her bra to his nose. Caroline snored softly on the bed in the dim streetlight bending its way into the shuttered window, but Daniel's eyes moved about the room, restless, and he reminded himself this was not Caroline's bed, not her slim collection of necklaces and scarves. Not her curio on the shelf—a little sailor wearing a little sailor's hat.

At work, Daniel sits at his desk, listening to the clacking and tapping at dozens of keyboards. He stretches his neck and tries to see outside through the corner of the window where he can just peek over his deskmate's divider. But there is nothing to see save the white stone of the next building. Daniel rests his head in his hands. Good hands, his mother would say, for good work. But as he turns on his computer and begins clicking his own keyboard, Daniel's fingers meld with the keys, and the scent of it all is gone.

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In Isabella's apartment, Caroline has changed the sheets, smoothed the duvet and closed the windows. He's not crazy or mean. He gathers his towels and trousers. He's not a man-child you would tell Clean up after yourself.

Be nice. That's what Caroline's father would say. Give it time.

But Caroline is late. The metro will be crowded. She sets each pillow into place and pulls Isabella's door closed with a loud click. When Caroline crosses a wet avenue on her way to the ministry office, jostled by the dozens of others making their way, she is uncertain now whether she even likes Daniel, whether any man is worth it.

Just then, a woman who looks like Isabella glides by on a bike, turned away, face and hair and scarf askew. Caroline doesn't call out. She presses forward, instead, the crowd of suits and skirts, elbows and shoulders pressing forward alongside her.