

The Third House

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The Ever Apartments sat halfway down Hannah Street bordered by undeveloped land and warehouses in desperate need of demolition. They were tall and flat; a giant book coloured with creams, whites, and beige. From a distance they looked like a poorly cared for tower of teeth. Small paddocks surrounded the grounds refusing to yield any shoots or grass, just there to collect cigarette butts and chip packets from the wind. The building was filled with all the pretty things one would expect. Couples and triples. Singles and nothings. The apartments were in no way unique, each a mirrored replica of another: soulless and sullen. This was true of all bar one. It sat in the centre of the middle level. This room was a palindrome. It was the same backwards, forwards, side to side, up to down. A perfect cube which was used as a storage space until a young man named Mott moved in at the end of a rather uninteresting autumn.

Unlike the others in the block it was without an apartment number. It had no heating, carpet or paint, just large single windows in the centre of the front and back walls. They were perfectly square panes of glass: if you were suspended in the air directly outside, you'd be able to see straight through and out the other side. Apparently when the apartments were first built there was no room at all, just a gaping hole at the heart of the building. It was designed to allow the roaming gods and air spirits to fly through unhindered, but had since been walled up to create a storage space for Mr Anderson, the building's caretaker.

Mott found the room on one of his many ventures. He loved nothing more than to walk into strange apartments and buildings searching his way from floor to floor, using fire exits and strutting through busy offices. He found that if he walked hurriedly through any workplace with a stern expression and a piece of paper in hand, people just let him do what he liked. Once he even joined an office birthday celebration, sang to the unknown, and collected a large slice of chocolate cake. Another time he photocopied several hundred duplicates of a résumé without being approached by a single person. To Mott, it seemed a great waste to have this perfectly symmetrical room left mostly unused. He approached Mr Anderson to argue his case for renting. Successful, and at the much reduced price of a hundred dollars a month, Mott prepared to move into the space once it was cleared.

As Mott moved his things into the apartment the rain began. Mott hated the rain. He managed to get most of his things in without getting them too wet. He found it hard to fight against the natural symmetry of the room and placed his mattress in the dead centre

on sixteen green and blue stolen milk crates. There were two doors, one in the middle of each side wall leading to various corridors. He ended up leaving his bookshelf and wardrobe outside as he could think of no way of using them and keeping the balance. He stacked his books evenly on either side of the room and folded his clothes in matching piles.

In the early days Mott only left his room to use the first floor toilet and to wash his dishes in the bathroom sink. He survived off cold tinned beans, or packet noodles which he cooked with water from an electric kettle. He spent his time sitting on his poorly sprung mattress, reading his diaries, and watching the comings and goings of the three houses directly across the street.

The houses sat lonely, huddled together. On either side of them were empty blocks, covered in sheets of corrugated iron, tufts of struggling weeds and large wooden pallets. The houses were rarely frequented. In the first week Mott saw only two old men enter the third house. He had seen three people leave the middle house but he hadn't seen anybody enter. They were such vibrant buildings, as if regularly re-painted. The first was yellow with a red door, the second red with a blue door, and the last blue with a yellow door. Mott found them fascinating and would sit for hours just watching and musing.

He decided to use the window at the back of his room as a mirror and did this by colouring the outside of it with marker pens and gaffer tape. It made his room darker but had the desired effect. He would often have conversations with his mirror image. He would dumbfound himself with probing questions, sometimes leaving himself exhausted and hollow on the cold cement floor. When this

happened he would crawl back to his bed and his new-found love of watching the strange houses across the street.

After a week of near constant rain, Mott realised he needed a break from the tedium of self reflection and surveillance. Donning the few warm and waterproof pieces of clothing he owned, he ambled down the four flights of stairs and out into the world. His cupboard sat waterlogged and muddy on the footpath. He kicked it as he passed. With a defeated thud it crumpled into wood and nails. The bookshelf was gone. A small boy strolled up the street and entered the yard of the first house across the road. He had never seen anyone enter or exit that residence. As the child neared the front steps a light above the red door popped on. It opened and closed and the boy was gone. Mott attempted to angle himself so as to see into the house, but was slow to react and saw nothing. The light went out. Shaking the rain from his hood, he wandered off to the shops to stock up on tins, packets and perhaps a new book or two.

Mott returned home later that afternoon and was greeted by the stale smell of his apartment and a lone letter wedged under the door. He placed the four shopping bags evenly on either side of the room, removed his wet clothing and sat on his bed, envelope in hand. Mott turned the letter over and over admiring the elegantly written print whose ink had been blotched by the rain.

It read:

*The man who resides in,
the central flat,
Ever Apartments,
33 Hannah Street.*

Mott eyed the space where the stamp should have been, then gently tore the flap open and removed a small scrap of paper. He read and re-read the two words written.

STOP WATCHING.

Shaken, Mott lowered the cheap plastic Venetian blind over the front window. He licked the back of the paper, stuck it to the black mirror, returned to his bed and sat staring at the words written. Who had he been watching? He had never seen the same person enter or exit any of the houses more than once, and was sure none of them had seen him.

Standing in front of the blind, Mott created a gap in the slats with his fingers. It was dark and raining outside. Mott's nose went numb from the chill of the glass. There were no lights on in the houses. There were no cars out front. They were not large, only two or three bedrooms at most. Weatherboard, with typical three step verandahs and one-lemon-tree gardens. Mott could hear life from a distant world. Trams. Cars. But his street was quiet and still. If he pressed his face right up against the edge of the window he could see the end of the road. A man was walking slowly and hunched. His black shape could easily be made out against the wet asphalt that sparkled orange from the streetlights. He approached the third house, shuffled up the steps and again a light switched on. The door opened, he entered, it closed, lights out. Mott dropped to the ground and leant against the wall breathing heavily. He wasn't sure what he was watching, but it was something. Was it sinister?

Mott woke to the sound of someone banging on his door. He had fallen asleep on the hard floor. Rubbing his legs which stung with pins and needles, he made his way across the room.

‘Yes?’ Mott called out tentatively.

‘I was wondering if I left a screwdriver in there.’ It was Mr Anderson.

‘No, sorry I don’t think so.’

‘Well if you find one, would much appreciate it.’

Mott opened the door an inch. ‘Mr Anderson. There was a letter under my door yesterday, did you see who sent it?’

Mr Anderson stood silent for a moment. He shuffled uncomfortably in his blue overalls, tousled his thinning hair, looked Mott dead in the eye and opened his mouth to speak. Then he turned, shoved his hands in his pockets and marched off down the corridor muttering. Mott wasn’t sure but he thought he made from the caretaker’s trailing and slurring words, ‘Leave well alone.’

For another week, Mott remained inside, mostly lying in his bed thinking or hurling questions at his dark reflection. Every once in a while he would get up again and watch the houses. He detailed every thought in his journal. Counting how many people he had spied entering and leaving the houses. Two children had gone into the first house, no exits. No one had entered the second house, but five men and a woman had left. And three old men had entered the last house. It almost seemed that if a boy walked into the first one yesterday, he would come out of the middle one a man today, and tomorrow would enter the last one elderly, never to leave again. That night Mott could not sleep. He listened to the sound the rain made as it hit his windows, realising that it had become white noise. For

days he had not acknowledged it. Looking down at the refined and flowing lettering of his diary he read the last words aloud.

‘I must know what is in the houses. Then I will stop watching.’

Mott gathered up his jacket and scarf, and within minutes was marching across the road to the last of the three residences. He chose the third house as for some reason he found it the most intriguing. It must have been late, all the distant sounds were gone. Perhaps he could hear the street sweeper, but even that was masked by wind and rain. He stepped forward into the yard and stumbled over the first of the three steps. A familiar smell seeped from the building. It was comforting. There was a window by the door but it was dark inside. The light above him clicked on. The door opened and Mott stepped inside.