

In the Shadows

It wasn't so much the noise that woke her up. It was the silence. She had grown accustomed to the constant low hum of machinery that ran through the night. It was one of the many negatives of living in an apartment complex within an industrial zone. She hadn't been given a choice though. She'd been placed here by her employer and it was here she had to live. The silence, though, was something new.

Emma wondered if her flatmate, Eun-Young was home. Eun-Young had also not been a choice. The two had been thrust together, forced by circumstance to share their lives. It was not the happiest of unions.

She inhaled; a long, deep intake of air to calm her racing heart. A fishy tang coated her nasal cavity, a reminder of Eun-Young's most recent infringement.

Eun-Young spent most of her time with her boyfriend. One of them, anyway. The other was far away, in America, oblivious of Eun-Young's transgressions. Emma did not approve, but it was none of her business.

She did care, that although she lived alone she shared her 42nd floor apartment. Sometimes she would wake in the morning and find something different, as if poltergeists had been in the night. On bad days, she would open the door to her haven to find Eun-Young bustling around her space, making a mess that she would blithely leave for Emma to tidy. It was intolerable. Yesterday's fish incident was the final straw.

Eun-Young was one of those vegetarians who didn't quite get it – the kind who order beef stew without the beef. Yesterday she had boiled five crunchy dried fish into a vegetable soup stock and discarded the pungent oceanic remains in a bowl on the kitchen table, along with a teetering pile of orange peel. Then she vanished, leaving Emma to deal with the mortal remains. The odour lingered now, the noxious fumes leaking from Eun-Young's room

where Emma had sat the bowl on the bed, the contents fermenting, waiting for Eun-Young's return.

Emma squinted in the darkness. In the far corner of the room she could see shapes that shouldn't be there. There were shadows, and then there was something else. They were moving, slithering and twisting into sinuous forms.

Her subconscious threw up the word "snakes". Frozen, she watched the faint outlines writhe, joining and parting in a venomous game of give and take. "Am I dreaming?" she wondered. She knew she was missing an important piece of information that would return this moment to normal, if only her synapses would fire. She wanted to solve the puzzle, but it seemed her brain had ossified overnight and she could not compute.

She inched upwards, the pillow bunching underneath her shoulders, her head at an awkward angle against the headboard. She blinked rapidly, trying to force her eyes to focus on the ethereal shapes. The snakes paid her no regard, continuing their mesmerising, writhing dance.

If Eun-Young was home, she'd have to warn her. She couldn't leave her sleeping with the snakes. Could she?

Pushing both hands against the prominent bed springs, she heaved herself into an upright position. As she stretched her right hand toward the lamp on the bedside table, her brain engaged. She paused, her hand hanging limply mid-air and deliberately scrunched her eyes tightly closed, letting a few seconds pass. When her eyelids lifted, her eyes focussed and the snakes sank back into the shadows.

The adrenaline ebbed as her arm completed its arc, clicking the light switch on and banishing the night. There were no snakes. There was only her, her vivid imagination and Eun-Young's fish.

