

Fight #3

Helen Phillips

Sometimes a strange man and woman appear in our apartment. They have a terrible marriage. They throw their snakeskin suitcases down in the living room, pop open the brass snaps, and pull out their foolish, expensive clothing. Soon their belongings are strewn over every surface. Clinging to each other, we hide in the corner.

Meanwhile, they stride bitterly through the rooms. They fight in the morning and leave for work without apologies, their minds still fizzy with hate. They enjoy hatred, the crazy freedom of it, the delightful abandon, almost like shedding the pull of gravity, taking flight from the stupid safe green earth, no longer handcuffed by the idea of home. They whisper cruel things and leave and return and whisper other, crueller things, their tense jaws no longer serving to muzzle their tongues, words unleashed to punch and pinch. Hate untethers them; they float. They float upward, upward. They cook, but fail to use enough butter. The food turns out dry and unsatisfying. Our plates prefer to jump out of their hands and shatter rather than serve them another meal. Our wineglasses crack rather than enable them to drink. They're forced to buy packaged crackers and cookies; soon there are crumbs everywhere. The desk, the bathtub, the bed—no place is spared the niggling filth of crumbs. They never scrub anything. The counters become sticky with unattended spills, the couch is stained, the coffee table nicked. And still they detest each other. They say, You clean it up. No, you. No, you. No, you. No, you. Even our invincible jade plant withers. Terrified, we curl ourselves into balls and roll ourselves into the closet.

When we reemerge, our plates and wineglasses sit tidily in the cupboard. The jade plant is thriving. The invisible suitcases are gone. The invisible man and woman are gone. We sigh. We go to the bed, where there are no crumbs. For a while, we forget about them. But soon we will begin to prepare ourselves for the next time they come and invade us.