

Reece Griffiths

Beth

So far as Beth can recall his existence in the Home, he has always known the Estate. The fences which border the periphery of his garden, tall enough for him to be unable to see over them, give way in one corner to a ginnel which leads to a small square of unmarked land where the fences of neighbouring houses meet. On the floor of this cement-slabbed space, covering most of it, stands the Estate: a miniature model of the surrounding residential housing area constructed from offcuts of fence wood, the edges of which have been soldered together with melted wax. There are trees and streetlights made from matchsticks; a Tesco Superstore awash with shuttlecock shopping trolleys; rows of abandoned terraced houses with all of their interior walls knocked out, creating corridors of sofas freckled with mildew and TVs burst at their cracks bleeding electronic light like a hallway of percolated malfunctioning eyes. At the model's centre stands the replica of his Home, larger in proportion to its neighbours, from which the roads span out in a series of three interconnected concentric circles.

The Home contains two floors and an attic, the ceilings so high the chains of the chandeliers appear to hang from only the darkness; its exterior windows are whitewashed like the front of a derelict pub, making it difficult to see inside. Within the model the house's garden also contains a tiny ginnel, barely perceptible, which leads to another square of land between the fences of neighbouring houses and another miniaturised model of the surrounding area, and within that model there is another, and within that another, and so on.

The total population of the Estate is two: Beth and Mother. Both live inside the house. Within the model there are two doppelgangers, molded purely out of wax, which imitate their actions within the game of the model. So that, for example, when Beth, kneeling before the model, raises his arm in the air, his doppelganger does the same. Beth, who usually records the presence of the model's structures in pencil on a tea-stained A4 paper map, cannot remember ever constructing these figures.

These imitations make it easy for him to monitor his Mother's movements throughout the day, and always ensure his presence within the Home on the occasions she comes back to surprise him with an early lunch. Although, often things do go wrong. Streetlights fall and split open the roofs of empty Toyotas, houses in the summer heat slide into stacks that block the roads. Every other week Beth will be sitting in the living room when the painted window will go dark with a great groan of crashing timber, and then rush out of the house, through the ginnel and to the model, to find a tree folded in on itself. And the moment after he returns from a repair, he finds his Mother stumbling in a panic to shut the front door, giving names to natural disasters, 'Landslide, landslide. Earthquake.'

Through these actions and the peculiar philosophy by which his Mother has chosen to raise him (having never in his life put him before a mirror and showing him only one photograph) Beth has developed a tendency to view himself from a third-person perspective. Often, as he walks about the house he envisions his molded doppelganger doing the same, or else he studies himself continually as though seen through the lens of a camera which floats above and behind his left shoulder.

Beth and Mother have grown used to the uneventfulness of living in the Home. Each day revolves around itself like the hands of an alarm clock, striking the numbers by which their manner of behaviour and choice of activity is defined. The majority of their time they spend alone, involved in things which

the other knows very little about, and whenever they are together anything that could be considered as divergent from routine has its existence rejected. Difference is hidden and protected. For their individual perceptions of reality to be maintained, each knows there are certain actions between them that the other must pretend do not exist.

Before six every morning, Mother takes out a ladder and whitewashes each of the house's windows with a tin of watered down emulsion and a rag. Beth, closing his eyes to the complaining glass, pretends to be asleep. He hears a spattering of rain and pictures his Mother's doppelganger as it wrings the rag out into the tin and carries it through the back door into the kitchen, before changing out of its window cleaner attire and sneaking back upstairs to wait for the bell.

Once he is certain she is back in bed, he gets up and rings the bell at the bottom of her stairs to let her know he has awakened. Then, descending from her room in the attic to where he is waiting, she lifts the train of Union Jacks trailing from his mungo gown and they walk in a bridal march, step by step, down another set of stairs and into the living room. There, they stop, curtsy, and light a candle to burn through the rest of the day next to the photograph of the Queen.

His mother had sewn the gown in the months she was pregnant, and since then it has been the only clothing he has ever been swaddled in. As a child it had engulfed him, and in his crib she had to take measures to ensure he wasn't smothered. Now, twenty-something years later, the vibrant red of the flags have severely faded and its overall tint is that of the pink of the inside of an eyelid; from the tears and frays at its edges, large fronds drag and tangle like translucent intestines, giving him the impression as he moves of a majestic, slovenly slug.

After this they retreat to the kitchen for their usual breakfast. Mother stands over him like a butler, reading from a list of doctrines she's written in biro on a Poundland spiral-bound notepad, while he sits stuffing his cheeks with spoonfuls of lukewarm porridge and strawberry jam in anticipation of the moment she will snatch it away from underneath him.

Once this is done, she picks up her handbag and leaves for the Chandlery - Sundays are her only day off - and Beth, idling for a moment, waits for the sound of the ignition, before disregarding Mother's rules to stay inside and squeezing quickly through the ginnel to watch her in wax driving her battered Peugeot to work.

That afternoon he sits cross-legged building a Newsagents sponsored by Lycamobile. Puzzling over its pieces as he cuts and sands them, he watches his double in the model do the same, glancing up occasionally to see Mother passing by the Chandlery's windows with an armful of eel-sized candles. There is a burst of wind, and some of the sawdust from the pieces drift up into Beth's eyes. Rubbing them, and shaking his head spasmodically, suddenly in his blindness he sneezes. A series of sharp claps, like a row of wooden pallets tipping like dominos to the ground, play out. When he can see again, the Chandlery has fallen to a pile of wood. Panicked, he reassembles it and, looking for his mother, sees her doppelganger with its wax-face twisted in disgust pulling out into the road that leads to Home.

By the time she stamps into the entranceway, her mackintosh tattered and patchy with plaster dust, Beth is sitting at the breakfast bar. Turning as she shuts the front door, she whispers, 'I'm not allowed to go anymore,' then lifts and locks the handle with her vessel-burst, lilac-coloured hand.

Reece Griffiths is a writer/artist based in Liverpool, UK. Their practice within fictional literature currently focuses on the use of metaversal themes and magical realism to subvert the doctrines of social norms. They are an Associated Artist with Round Lemon and Voices Editor of Overdressed Magazine. They have also recently released a virtual/physical work, 'Walkies' (created with artist Ellie Towers), as part of The Royal Standard's Space Raiders Residency.