For Sale (Short Story Sample)

The sky was the colour of black ice when Nina Culwitch opened her eyes and dragged herself out of her cot.

From above Nina, there came the muffled grunt of the woman in the middle bunk, rolling over in her sleep. A faint whimper drifted out of the stiff shadows. Nina turned in the direction of the lower bunk on her left. Another one of her roommates was frowning through the darkness; twitching under the threadbare, grey blankets that the woman had wrapped around her pasty shoulders. Nina watched the woman's silent convulsions for ten, long seconds, then turned back around and folded up her blankets.

Out of respect for her bunkmates, Nina didn't switch on her phone's torch. In an hour, they would all be crawling out of their cots and shuffling off to work. Fortunately, Nina had plenty of experience getting dressed in the dark.

Gently, Nina pulled open the bedroom door. Her bag, already packed, squatted on the tattered, brown carpet like a small dog. Nina had prepared it the previous night, in order to make her departure as smooth as possible. Nina picked up the bag that contained the entirety of her possessions: two shirts, two pairs of jeans, three black socks, two pairs of standard beige underwear, a toothbrush, a portable charger, and a ragged scarf that had been gifted to Nina by her sister. Everything else had either been donated, sold or thrown away.

The bag was lighter than Nina had expected.

Silently, she glanced over her gaunt shoulder, blue eyes sliding over eight slumbering figures. Even after three years, Nina could only pull three or four names out of the black hole of her memory–and only two of those names could be connected to a face. Nina didn't (couldn't) blame anybody in particular for this. They had their own lives; their own contracts. Besides work, the only thing that she and these other women had in common was a roof; a roof that was draped in black, poisonous mould.

Nina padded down the corridor. The lift was broken so, wordlessly, with barely even a sigh, she trudged in the direction of the stairs. Nina guided herself using her phone's torch; a speck of silver drifting through floor after floor of impenetrable darkness. As she stumbled, clipping her heels against the cold, metal stairs, Nina contemplated fumbling for a light switch. This idea was cast aside almost as quickly as it appeared; the prohibition on excessive energy consumption

© Rhys Clarke

wouldn't expire for another three weeks. It was one thing to take a lift down to the ground floor–if one had been working–but needlessly flooding the tower block with *superfluous light*, would most likely result in a fine for the remaining tenants. Even if she was leaving them, Nina saw no reason to put her former bunkmates and neighbours through needless suffering.

Nina didn't know what the word *superfluous* meant. She just remembered hearing it, many times, whenever her roommates went through the digital communications sent by their Landlord. She had never met him, but he always seemed to be in a rage against his tenants and their "superfluous" complaints. Their "superfluous" requests for maintenance. Their "superfluous" demands that the Landlord arrange for increased CCTV to be installed around the tower's perimeter. Their "superfluous" pleas for portable heaters to be provided during the harsh winters. All discarded. All denied. The Landlord was God for the women in the tower block, a punitive and demanding God. Nina didn't believe in God; most of the churches had been closed down long before she was born, but she sometimes imagined that if he did exist, he would have the face of their Landlord. The problem was, she didn't know what the Landlord looked like so, sometimes, in her nightmares, this face would change. Sometimes it would be beetroot and bearded. Sometimes it would be sharp-cheeked and narrow-eyed. Sometimes the only thing she could picture was a huge, dark hole, from which all the anger and the scorn and the hatred in the world gushed from, like blood bursting from a gaping wound.

Synopsis

For Sale depicts a brutally divided future society. The wealthy elite spend their days in endless luxury and comfort; the poor masses are crammed into crumbling tower blocks, packed like sardines into barely furnished rooms with complete strangers. The only way to escape this life of poverty is to become a donor and sell your most valuable assets to the upper classes. Eyeballs, teeth, hair, fingers, arms...whatever body parts are currently fashionable, the donors will willingly sell to acquire a scrap of comfort and stability. *For Sale* is a dark satire of the beauty industry, whilst also exploring the dehumanising impact of social and economic inequality.

©Rhys Clarke