

These Dividing Walls

Hodder & Stoughton - Edward Stanford Travel Writing Awards

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First published in Great Britain in 2017 by Hodder & Stoughton
An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 473 64153 2
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 473 64154 9
Ebook ISBN 978 1 473 64155 6

Typeset in Sabon MT by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

For Anne, a dear friend.

And for Alex, always.

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Prologue: The Building

Far back on the Left Bank, there is a secret quarter. Beyond the neon-lit slopes of Montparnasse, the winding cobbles of the fifth arrondissement, a warren of quiet streets lie sandwiched between boulevards. Little traffic comes through here.

Number thirty-seven sits at the meeting of two streets in this forgotten corner of the city. It is much like the buildings that surround it – late nineteenth-century, pale stone. But for its turquoise door it might slip from view altogether.

On summer nights, its residents return home as the sun sinks over the city. Lights are turned on, windows opened; dinners cooked and babies put to bed. The smell of garlic browning in a pan drifts into the courtyard, along with a child's cries and snippets of conversation caught on the breeze.

Within its walls, people kiss. They talk, they laugh; someone cries, perhaps. A few are glad to sit alone. Others wish that they did not.

As darkness falls, the lights are gradually extinguished again. On such a heat-soaked, airless night as this, number thirty-seven's residents lie in their beds, listening to the rise and fall of neighbours' breath. Life is measured by the scrape of strangers' plates, the tinny ring of someone else's telephone, the grunts of sex (and other functions), until all is finally quiet again.

Number thirty-seven has its stories; in this it is like any building. For what building doesn't have secrets? How much does anyone know of what goes on behind their neighbours' doors?

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Edward wakes with a shout in lung-crushing panic, palms slammed flat against the wall, feet scrambling up the bed towards him. *Where am I?* His heart thunders in his open mouth and he does not know if he is still screaming. He flings an arm out in front of him into the darkness – *a light, there must be a light* – but finds only a glass of water that his elbow sends flying. It is momentarily airborne before he hears the clunk, the wet shatter of it, and when his sleep-fattened fingers finally locate the light switch the rug is laced with shards of dangerous glitter.

Things swim slowly into focus, a pool of orange light beating back the shadows. He is in a bed, in a room, under the eaves of a building. Under the roof's slope he can make out a desk, the outline of his backpack, a mirror reflecting a blur of light. The window is open – banging against the wall – and the pale curtains are sucked in and out by the wind, rushing up into the room on their release like long, ghostly fingers.

Avoiding the glass, Edward makes his way across the space on unsteady legs. His palms are slick with sweat as they fumble with the ratty loop of rope that's been used, for years it seems, to tie the window open. It's come loose while he's slept. These fiddly moments bring with them a sense of calm, of focus. The air that whistles along the rooftops is cool, the knot of dread in his stomach is loosening, and by the time the work is done he has remembered that the terror was a nightmare, that he is in Paris, and that this is Emilie's apartment.

Apartment. He looks around him; the room is smaller than

his friend had implied. A single bed in one corner, the 'kitchen' in another, its electric hotplate just six diagonal paces from the clown-print pillow. Edward's lips twitch as the fabric face leers back at him. It's typical Emilie, this jumble of childhood bedsheets and snatches of paper thrown up all over the place. The wall by the bed flutters in the night air: patterns, post-cards, sketches, pinned together like butterflies' wings.

Edward returns to the bedside and collects pieces of glass into an ashtray. The wind has quieted a little now, more breath than shriek as it ruffles the wall of paper, whispers over the bedclothes. His breath is still rattling in his chest. Just before four, according to his watch, but the blood is too high in him to think of sleep. He is in the grip of that sharpness that follows fear – the sudden cognisance of every cell, the microscopic rush of blood through each capillary.

The night terror sits just out of sight on his shoulder, a dark bird dancing its feet along his collarbone. Always the same: his sister's face smiling at him, the moment before the car hits stretching into an eternity in which he can't move, can't speak, can't tell her to stop . . .

The glass rattles beneath his fingers as Edward's hands start up their shaking again. He strains his ears but hears no noise from his neighbours. He hates the thought that someone might have heard his cry.

Opening the kitchen bin he is met with the warm rush of decomposition: rotting fruit, cigarettes, the queasy staleness of beer that's spent hot days at the bottom of old bottles. This is typical Emilie, too. He'd pushed the piles of dirty laundry out of his mind – and into the cupboard – when he'd arrived; tried not to think about the balled-up lace knickers by the bed, or how crisp they were underfoot. But he hadn't checked the bin, and in the pre-dawn murk the sweet putrefaction turns his stomach.

He pulls on jeans, trainers, yesterday's T-shirt. It cloaks him in eight hours of bus journey, the baked sweat of a

Channel crossing spent on deck, but it's better than the bin bag, which he ties and walks out of the room at arm's length.

Four o'clock, and Edward stands outside his new building, in a new city, breathing damp summer deep into his lungs. He doesn't know where the bins are yet, so he's left his bag of rubbish out on the deserted street. No one stirs. There's no one to stir, just lines of buildings flanked by parked cars.

He thinks back to the conversation he had with Emilie, standing barefoot in thick grass, the scent of hay heavy in his nostrils, pollen dancing in the golden air.

'I need to get out, Em.'

'*Edward!*' That tone she uses in exasperation, usually accompanied by the flailing of a densely-bangled wrist. He'd imagined the clink and jingle of it down the phone, metal on metal via metal, her handset to his, cheek to cheek across hundreds of miles of ether. 'Use the apartment. *Please*. No one's going to mind, my aunt's probably not even there, I'll get the *gardienne* to let you in, or there'll be some old *voisin* with a key . . .'

Edward didn't know what those words meant, but in the sunshine, with the bright timpani of her voice, her laugh, the surety with which she described it all, he was swept up on it. Up on the cloud of her. And he'd agreed, and bought a ticket, and it was less than three days ago and now here he is on a street in Paris in the early hours of a Friday morning.

And not the Paris he knew about, either. This is no boulevard – no landmarks here. The night before, the bus had dropped him at the back end of a car park behind a shopping centre. Shrieking teenagers with backpacks, an Orthodox Jewish couple and their impossibly tiny baby, a crumpled old man with a stick who'd immediately struck out in the opposite direction to everybody else. Edward had followed the crowd as it trailed its way through back doors and featureless corridors down into the metro, where he

jumped the stile like everyone in front of him, right in front of the guard, her eyes glazed and vacant, and then onto a train which hurtled past names that meant something to him (*Champs Elysées, Musée du Louvre*), before changing onto one whose names did not. He emerged into streets filled with end-of-day crowds, the directions he'd scribbled down smearing on his damp palm as he navigated old women with shopping trolleys, kids streaking past on scooters, greengrocers waving bags of overripe cherries in his face, their bloody juice dripping vividly onto the pavement while outside a butcher's shop two men hurled grease from a rotisserie oven into the road so that the ground swam with fat and soapsuds. Wide women waddled along wrapped head to toe in neon prints, a teenager rode a motorbike along the pavement, a friend standing up on the seat behind him, and Edward, a country boy, reeled.

Now though, the streets are quiet. Edward takes a few tentative steps, but the morning light is taking its time and unease coats the base of his still-jittery stomach.

He is turning back to the building, to the great turquoise doorway that leads into the courtyard, when he hears it, could swear he hears it.

'Edward!'

His name whispered quick, urgent, carried on the air from the empty street. He looks but sees nothing, hears only the rush of blood to his head. He slams the door, crosses the courtyard, and takes the five flights of stairs at a run.

If the adrenaline coursing through Edward's veins for a second time that night had let his pupils widen, had let his eyes linger a little longer, he might have made out the shape of a man sleeping in the doorway opposite. Or not sleeping, in fact, as the man has been watching Edward with interest. This street is his domain by night. From his bed he rolls an old cigarette between thumb and forefinger, his eyes flinty in the strike of

the match, intent on the space where the young man has been standing.

And if Edward could see into the apartments he passes on his ascent, he'd see that not all his neighbours are asleep either, early though the hour is. On the first floor, a middle-aged woman fans herself, half-hearted movements ineffectual against the bedroom's stale heat. Chantal's husband will not sleep with the window open, so she passes the night in long, warm minutes, sweat beading along her breastbone, aiming an occasional kick at the lumpen form next to her. '*César*, you're snoring!'

On the second floor there are children dreaming. Milky, contented, a baby stirs in his crib and in his basket a dog stirs too, chasing the elusive rabbit holes of sleep. The children's mother, Anaïs, stands at the window. Sleep evades her, her fingers gripping the windowsill and its flaking paint as she wills the sky to darken again, wills the morning to hold itself at bay.

Puffing, wheezing, Edward winds his way up the building, past the third floor where a sleepy hand bats away a mosquito, the fourth where he sees a computer's blue light in an open window across the courtyard. A hunched figure is furiously typing and, pausing for breath, Edward can almost hear the percussive assault of fingers on keyboard.

Finally the fifth floor, and Edward stands in his room with his back against the door. Outside, the sky is swimming inkily from black to blue and over the furthest rooftops brown smudges are starting to appear. He locks the door, has to stop himself from unlocking and relocking it again (a maternal rabbit hole down which he does not want to disappear today). He regains the bed, the clown-print pillow which smells, now that he thinks about it, of Emilie. He turns it over, buries his head in it with unusual force, trying to sleep, trying not to think of his friend and the one night they slept together, a night where the only bits that bumped were the bits you didn't want to – a long percussion of teeth and noses.

Edward's cheeks burn in allegiance with the sun, which is stalking up now with a vengeance, turning everything red. When finally he dips below the surface, it is to the sound of shutters opening below, of cars starting in the street, and the building waking up to begin its day.

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