

Douglas Coupland 1,000 word  
short story award:  
1<sup>st</sup> prize winner



## ESCAPE VELOCITY

Indy Datta

You sold your last car just under three months ago, to a fat property developer from Sutton Coldfield. A metallic black banana-nose Thunderbird: you didn't know if he bought it because he wanted to make believe the Bristol Road was Highway One, or because he thought it looked like the Batmobile. You felt a small lurch of pride as it slid off your forecourt, bouncing slightly on its suspension, in languid reproach to every other car on the road. Now, you imagine it beached in front of his five-bedroom mock Tudor executive home for want of enough petrol to make it to the end of the drive, sinking onto its softening whitewall tyres. Three days after you sold the T-bird, Egypt and Syria went to war with Israel. Two weeks after that the war was over, and OPEC doubled the price of oil, and when you heard the

news on the radio, you knew you were finished. You locked up, you sent the YTS boy away, you went home to bed.

Looking back, you guess you expected your wife to get you out of bed when she got home from her shift at Dudley Road. Or your son when he got home from his at Longbridge, where he fits parcel shelves in Austin Maxis (only three days a week: you'd got used to driving past the silent car plant on the other four days of the week and you no longer felt the ghost-town stillness like a wall). But neither of them did. You feel certain that you must at some point have talked to your wife, that she must at least once have asked you how long you intended to stay in bed, but you can't remember any such conversation. On the second day she brought home a bedpan and a bed bottle that she'd taken from the ward, and went to sleep in the spare room. On the first weekend your son brought home a thick reel of aerial cable and moved the television into your bedroom: the trailing cable stops the door from shutting flush. But it's never left open. The barely visible sliver of landing outside the bedroom and the view through nylon net curtains of the thin winter sky over the back garden are your only clues that the universe hasn't shrunk to coincide with this room.

It's dark, now, and the curtains are drawn: heavy olive green velour, the curtain tails brushing on the patterned brown carpet. A Japanese-style paper light shade hangs from the ceiling and rocks slightly with the house as next door's washing machine starts to spin, throwing fine shadows of its skeleton on the nicotine-stained wallpaper. The television is showing Top of the Pops. Jimmy Saville introduces Slade playing Merry Xmas Everybody – a fat, unlit cigar now in his hand, now in his mouth. Your wife, sitting on a dining chair by the side of the bed, still in her nurses uniform, looks up from the

Habitat catalogue for a second and back down again without catching your eye. The doorbell rings.

The young Indian GP leans over you, the metal of his stethoscope bell makes cold circles on your chest and your back. His neat, black hair is T-square parted, you catch a whiff of coconut. On the television, Raymond Baxter is talking about the Skylab astronauts, about how they'll be spending three months in free fall, about how their muscles will atrophy without gravity to push against.

That'll be me, you think, I haven't escaped gravity – I've given in to it – but the effect will be the same. As my body gets used to not doing anything, my metabolism will diminish and I'll stop eating. Soon I won't have the strength to stop the bed covers from crushing the breath from me while I sleep.

The doctor says something about bedsores and something about psychiatric referral, but you don't register it. You wonder if he'll disappear if you close your eyes. You close your eyes.

He's gone. You've been asleep, but you think you're awake now. You think you can't move your arms or your legs, but you can't be sure, because you can't feel them where you should feel them denting the mattress. You think you can't move your head, but you can't be sure because you can't feel it where you should feel it propped against the headboard. You think you can move your eyes: you think you look around the room. Your wife is still sitting in the same place, still staring at the pages of the Habitat catalogue with equal parts intentness and blankness. The washing machine next door is quiet.

The light shade is motionless, the shadows of its bones no longer dance across the walls and the ceiling. On the television, Jasper Carrott is doing a routine about getting lost in Spaghetti Junction. You wonder if he'll disappear if you close your eyes. You close your eyes.

Your wife is on her feet, at the television, cycling through the channels. The buttons go thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk. BBC1, BBC2, ITV, BBC1. All closed down. The tail end of God Save the Queen on BBC1. Your wife switches the television off, and you hear the rush of static and see the image of the BBC globe shrink to a white line, then a white dot. She turns out the light and leaves the room wordlessly, pulling the door to after her, leaving a slim column of light where it won't close.

In the half-light everything appears grey, but you remember the colours of the things in the room and you recite them silently to yourself, to try and fix this room universe in your mind, to stop yourself from blinking out like the BBC globe. You think you can move your eyes: you think you can look around the room, itemising. The shaft of white light from the landing, the green curtains, the brown carpet, the yellow wallpaper, the white dot.

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