

Art

Behind the net curtains ...

Two backstreet houses, two self-absorbed men, two women washing up. You have 20 minutes to watch

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Die Familie Schneider

Whitechapel, east London

You pick up your keys to Die Familie Schneider from an office just off Whitechapel Road in the East End of London. You walk down a street full of children's clothing manufacturers, with signs in English and Bangladeshi, round the back of the Victorian Royal London Hospital, to a derelict terrace of two-up, two-downs. Most of the houses are boarded up with metal grilles. The two adjacent houses to which you have keys have net curtains at the windows and dirty brown front doors. You let yourself into the first one.

There is a dimly lit narrow hallway, old brown carpet, stained walls, a sickly smell you cannot quite identify. All the doors are closed, but you have the sense of not being alone. You go into a kitchen in which a woman dressed in brown is vacantly washing up. She betrays no sense of you being there, keeps at work on her plates. You cough. Through a beaded curtain, in a tiny front room, there are cigarette butts in an ashtray, a bag of shopping from a convenience store, some destitute chairs, a couple of TV guides. The walls are nicotine stained, the smell sweet and stagnant.

Back in the kitchen you try to lighten the mood, you offer to dry the dishes. The woman does not look round. You wonder how all this differs from a fairground haunted house and then you realise you are the ghost. You think about tapping the woman on the shoulder. Instead, you open the fridge, out of interest, and find a single jar of pickled cucumbers. You walk up the narrow stairs and are confronted with two other doors. You open the first one, not by now without a degree of trepidation. The room smells of old towels and hairspray. It is a bathroom and there is a shower dribbling over the bath and in the shower a naked, balding man with his back to you is masturbating with some urgency.

You watch his back for a bit. You can't think of anything to say and anyhow he seems in a world of his own. You slip out and close the door, wander into a bedroom next door, with old shag pile carpets and grimy sheets and a foul sheepskin rug. In one corner there is a baby changing mat leaning against a wall, in the other a bin bag, in which, you realise, someone is sitting quite still. You go back out, unnerved maybe, now really hating the smell.

You peer round the bathroom door and check the man is still wanking. He is. You go downstairs and discover there is a cellar, which is hardly lit. You know this is all here for you, that it's art and quite safe and so on, but you don't fancy it much. Still, you go down. In the gloom of one room there is an overturned chair and sacks of rubbish or whatever rotting. In the other, a sad stack of iced cakes. You go back upstairs, past the woman washing up and let yourself out into the air.

And then, inevitably you try the key in the next door, in which you find everything is exactly the same, the smell, the stains the woman washing up - a twin, you hope - the man in the shower, a little hairier than his counterpart, toiling away vigorously, the person squatting in the binliner. You would like to think that familiarity makes this funnier, or less strange, but it doesn't, quite.

Your 20 minutes is up, which is a relief, so you let yourself out. You pass the next person wandering up the street clutching their keys. You wonder what to write in your notebook.

In the end, standing outside a shop selling second-hand wheelchairs, you write that you fear a little for the German artist Gregor Schneider who created these houses, who stained the walls and created the smells and auditioned the masturbators. That, though you quite like the idea of it, you have no particular desire to visit Schneider's lifelong project, Dead House ur, in Germany, in which, over a period of 20 years, he has transformed the interior of this childhood home into a series of insulated tunnels and rooms within rooms, all of which he once shipped to the Venice Biennale. That you love the idea of Artangel, who funded this London project. That the houses make you think about public and private spaces, and about death, a bit. That the smell seems to have lingered in your shirt and on your skin. That you wouldn't want to be there much after dark. That all houses maybe carry the residue of past loneliness, and worse. That you felt you hadn't really been there, somehow. And that you must repaint your bathroom.

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