

# SHEETS

*A short story*  
By Kwame Dawes

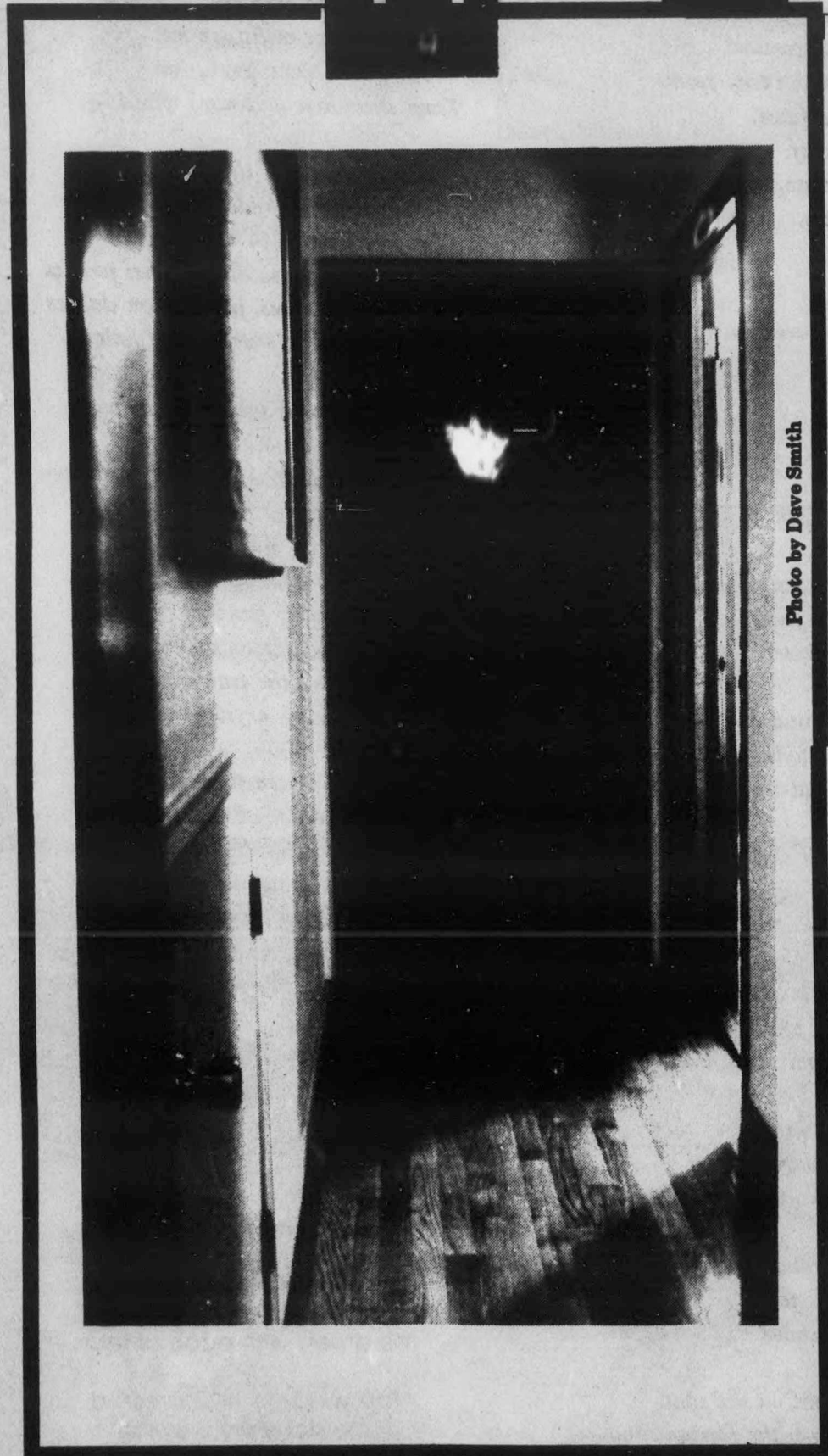


Photo by Dave Smith

**T**he room smelt of mint. She kept five tiny mint plants in different corners of the room and she watered them with religious consistency and care. Everything seemed so small, so calculatedly compact — nothing out of place. He had bought four packs of the cheap nylon four-pairs-a-pack socks from Zellers when they started seeing each other so he could take his shoes off at the door and place them on the clean rubber mat/tray by the closet.

She wouldn't let him stop to take the shoes off this night. She touched his hand and turned around walking away towards the room. He was afraid of what she wanted. This was the first time she was asking him to come over so late and already he felt as if she was trying to consume him with her vulnerability. They had talked about that.

The lamps like ornate objects jewelled the tiny living room with a self-conscious symmetry throwing neatly outlined pools of light over the richly textured blue and gold carpet. The room glowed mute yellow. The lampshades were thin delicate screens on which the well-crafted frames and stems of the lamps were silhouetted. The walls seemed darker than usual, lost in the somber aura of the room. The eyes of the soft animal dolls that sat and strolled in frozen poses all around the room glowed with their stares.

He followed her into the darker corridor that led to her room. Her door was ajar and a thin line of light cut across the floorboards of the passageway but was swallowed up by the sheet of blue light flowing from the room on the right side of the corridor. He always thought it was a linen cupboard until she wouldn't let him go in there when he was looking for some sheets. Then she had told him that that is the room in which her mother had died and she didn't want to disturb it. When he saw that it was open, he grew uncomfortable.

She stopped in the corridor but didn't turn around. He could see now that she was not wearing anything on her feet and that she was naked under the thin cotton shift she wore to sleep. She told him that sometimes she slept naked underneath when it was alright to do so. He watched the uncertainty in the way she held her head as she stared ahead. Her long black hair touched her bottom and her fingers tugged on the fabric nervously. He felt very close to her. He was about to ask what was wrong when she turned into the room. He followed.

It was like a kitchen without a stove or a fridge. The huge window was covered by an off-white canvas sheet. There was a counter in the middle of the room. Apart from a three layer wooden tray lined with white pillowcases, and covered with several rolls of towels and silver instruments there was nothing else in the room. The walls were white and completely bare. Three standing lamps with blue fluorescent bulbs buzzed static through the room. There was a woman lying on the counter.

She was covered with a white sheet. He could see her nakedness under the material. Her nipples, her navel and the rough pubic hairs shaped the fabric with shadow and light. Her legs hung over the edge of the counter at the knees. Her feet could not reach the two small stools at the base of the counter that must have been there for that purpose. Her eyes were closed and her mouth had fallen open as if in careless sleep. Her fingers gripped the edge of the counter through the sheets. The light fell on her veins making them look pale blue. Her hair formed an unruly halo about her face. Her lipstick was smudged towards her right cheek where her hand must have wiped before reaching for the edge of the counter. A transparent cylinder with wires running through it and leading to an outlet rested beside her right thigh. The sheet, where her bottom met the table, was damp with blood. It was only a thin line.

The trembling woman in the cotton shift stood at the head of the counter and stared at the body as if waiting for something to happen. She touched the lying woman's forehead gently with the tips of her fingers and muttered something about the chill in the room. When she looked up he could see the fear, desperation, helplessness and sheer fatigue that she had hidden from him since she had let him in. Her eyes were dark with worry and her mouth kept shaking as if trying to utter words. The tiny hole at the base of her neck leapt rhythmically. She looked to her feet and then looked into his eyes. He hadn't realized how much older than him she was until that moment. She shook her head and shrugged.

"She didn't say nothing. I asked if it was hurting, I did, but she just said no, no, she said, smiling, really." She was calm, steadier than he thought she would be. "She just smiled and I went on. Her husband is coming home, you see...and she just fainted like that. I didn't know but she must have. I looked at her and she was smiling. Then she wouldn't wake up. It was the blood. That is what it was...Who would have thought." She was quiet for a while before she spoke again in a low voice. "Go figure," she said. "Go figure."

She touched the hair again. They stayed there staring at each other and contemplating the weight of this night. Life had suddenly changed. He wanted to run from the room, run from the village, run from himself and hide away forever from the fear that he could feel growing in him. She saw it in his face and started to cry.

"Don't leave me. I was doing good, truly. I was doing good..."

The woman did not move on the counter. The dead are so quiet — too quiet. ■

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