

Somebody is Warning Me, You'll Change Your Mind

by Keeley Young

I am tired, I tire myself out.

I've opened the doors to this house quite a few times before, but never to you, so please, come in. The sky is purple outside, dripping in sunlight, with a few marshmallows that are clouds, just in disguise. I set the kettle upon the counter again, it filled with cool water waiting to be heated. Waiting to be warmed up, burned up but with a grin, achieving its goal when I do not, I am not.

Why'd you come, then?

The water starts to heat, everything much easier here than years ago, than when my mother was my age, and her mother my age, and hers, and hers, and hers. And hers. I ramble on thinking like that. My mother never had any girls, so here I lay to sever the chain. Yet I boil water, yet I make tea.

Are you comfy there?

There is a window in the kitchen, if you bother to notice it. My garden, outside. Weeds, more like. I used to grow tomatoes, carrots, some herbs, when I first moved in, but I'm sure you realise that was what, five years ago now. Now it is the haven for weeds, and overgrown tomato plants, spots of herbs here and there. No more carrots. I ate those. Beyond the garden, those weeds, is the fence, and then whatever lies beyond that – sometimes rabbits, sometimes no rabbits, sometimes a stray cat. Once I named the stray cat, I called him George, and then he never strayed near the fence again. No more George, or no more care from George. No matter. The rabbits have no names. Sometimes I eat the rabbits.

It tastes nice, you know. Rabbit meat. Try it sometime, will you?

The kettle boils. I pour some into cup a, some into cup b, with teabags in each.

I hope you like chamomile.

The two cups and their matching saucers are set down upon the table, one in front of me, the other set down in front of my guest. I offer up biscuits; treats I buy in town in case I have any company. I like to tell myself the biscuits are for company, I must always be expecting company, just to be safe, but at night sometimes I snack on one or two. I buy packet after packet of biscuits sometimes, no company but plenty of nights sitting alone, watching the television play some show I've seen before, or news for a country I have no care for. I want to leave, but I tire myself packing my suitcase, and then I unpack the suitcase, and the suitcase goes back up into the cupboard and I smile back to myself, the warmth of the pillow underneath my head. I try to sleep, then, and try to dream. I dream whenever I want to dream, sometimes. Other times...I dream when I don't think about dreaming. At night I don't think of boiling water for tea, but I remember how to.

You don't want another biscuit?

Why did you come, anyway?

You set down your cup of tea, watching me. My guest. My hair is probably loopy, wild, tangled, although I brush it every day, to pass some time, to keep myself ready for inevitable guests. I suppose it is advantageous to assume I become like the help, like a neat freak, when I think someone might come knock on the door. I haven't spoken to someone since B came, five months ago.

If I mention B to you, do you remember him?

No, I guess not.

I take another sip of the tea, it tastes fresher with company, and I watch a smile form upon your face, a sort of smile you don't see very often on television. A real one, not forced or fake or crafted by the lighting cues, and the set dressings, and the costumes, or the over-the-top dialogues. I've said a joke, too. An old joke I used to use back then, five years ago, but you still find it funny – maybe times haven't changed since I came here.

I wish I could take the joke further, and flirt with you.

You take another biscuit and tell me you won't spend the night in the guest room, like B did.

You do remember B then.

I suggest we take a little stroll outside in the garden, and I rush around picking out weeds from the ground, brushing the dirt off my hands as best as I can. A few of the tomatoes are ripe, perfect for dinner tonight. You ask me how my visit with B was. B was respectful, kind, decent, helped a little in the garden before the weeds grew right back in again, and he, yes, spent the night in the guest room. Nothing else, and he left in the morning.

You can't tell me much more than what B told me.

Which pisses me off. B only told me what the one before him, L, told me. At least L had news, he had something to enlighten me with and change my day, but these past five months reflecting on the same news, twice, it bores me. It tires me out. I toss another handful of weeds in the bin, and you do too, before something beyond the fence catches your eye. It's one of the rabbits.

You tell me B might be the next to visit, in two months or so.

The rabbit bounds towards the fence.

The sky is becoming a sickly grey, a clouded gem, and I offer up the guest bedroom. I wash the sheets the same days I wash my own sheets, drying them all long enough, always alert someone might come to stay. I know the journey away from this cottage must be the same length it was to get here, endless, sore feet inevitable. There is the town, true. But an inn can whisper much louder than a forest. I point up at the clouds, swirling like the whipped cream atop those desserts on the television, but more miserable, less satisfying. You glance at me, quickly.

You'll leave first thing in the morning, then.

I sit up at night sometimes, that's why I am tired.

I first count the sheep twirling in the blueberry sky, trace them first leaping over, through, into invisible clouds, tumbling headfirst into softness, and then sometimes concreteness, rough surface, the sheep bleat back at me, and I'm stuck awake. When counting fails me, sometimes I flick on the light and read, to pretend I don't need the sleep, the rest, the vacation. At some stage I read every book in this skinny, dark wood bookcase, and I told one of my guests, and B brought me a few boxes of new books when he came. I was introduced to B, I shook his hand, after he'd set the box down near the bookcase. "They're for you," he said, opening the box. Volumes and volumes of books, wedged in neatly with their cardboard shell, their part-time home.

Every month I move something around, like redecorating, making the place more my own. Every month it seems this cottage is becoming more and more my permanent home, rather than some advertised stay-cation. Remember I sometimes name stray cats.

Remember stray cats can flee, yet I cannot.

It's another night of no sleeping, then. I stopped counting sheep, and I won't get up and turn on the light, because he is sleeping in the other room – our guest. When he greeted me at the door, he told me to just call him U. With a little switching around, it was you and I again, today, meeting all over again. The man I met today has shorter hair, though. And it is darker, and his eyes are more rounded, and he wears similar clothes to what B wore, and what L wore, and the one before him, whatever his letter was. R. He was R, the first guest, the one with the earrings he hid under his hair, and the tattoo he hid under his long sleeves. I don't know why I remember this, and almost forgot his name. His letter.

So no to the sheep-counting, and no to the getting up and switching on the light and reading, and I'm not about to wander outside in case he stirs and thinks I'm abandoning him here, leaving the duty to him. It has never been called a duty since that first day. No, I can't even go into the garden in

case the dread sets in for him. I won't go knocking on the guest bedroom door, I annoyed him enough today. Just by suggesting he stay. But that storm – the storm that culled itself an hour or so ago, when I'd first tried falling asleep – that storm would have struck him, and stripping off his wet, soaked, clinging clothes would have invited more than expected.

No, he could've stripped himself down.

But I would have offered to help.

I get up, anyway, but leave the light off, even though the trail of yellow would only blur in the crack underneath the door. Maybe he'd wake up sometime in the next few minutes and notice, and think I meant to do something beyond settle my brain. Sometimes it can help to lie there, still, doing nothing, thinking nothing – but mostly it only makes me think of things, instead of that nothing. Nothing is boring, nothing is not anxiety-ridden and staking and stalking. I wander around my bedroom for a few minutes, staring in the dark, trying to think of what I can do. Every little pocket of light is not an invitation, it is just a pocket of light, coming in from the blinds. Even my boredom does not tire me enough for sleep.

Moon times for a loner.

Did I tell him today that it's been five years? Something like that. You forget about the longevity of things when everything is the same for five or so years. There is no promise of a lengthy relationship with the guests, with R, and L, and B, and now U. I don't anticipate seeing them again, and only sometimes do they come again. U may come again sometime, or he may not. It could be someone that calls himself P, with shaggy blonde hair and a nipple piercing. Not that I would ever know he has it, the piercing. I've only seen B naked. L shirtless, R fully-dressed and nothing else. U sealed himself off in his room when I told him he'd have to stay the night, after we ate dinner. The potatoes were too dry, too salty. I didn't give him enough gravy, though he never asked for more.

I'm more awake now than earlier. More alert, I suppose.

Being alone changes you, alters you.

Remember the time they sent her. C.

An hour has passed, an hour I slept. Somehow my head had hit the pillow and I fell under, just like that, but that being under, drifting deeper down, wasn't meant to last forever. Imagine that. U stirs in the morning, checks in to make sure I have everything I need until the next visitor, and there I am, dead. Off to some mythical island where the young never grow old. Neverland. If the escape is Neverland, then I'm someplace like Skull Island, just out of the reach of it. What I would do to watch the old movie version of *Peter Pan*, so it's not another cooking show again.

I did dream, though. An unscripted, unplanned dream, the best kind. It all ties in, because in the dream, I saw her again, C. I remember the moment I opened the door to her, I was stumped. Not in the oh gosh a woman way, by now you can presume otherwise, but because it was the first woman I had seen in two years. Outside the people in the village, the women manning stalls and selling flowers and flour and racing around to catch their children. She was the first woman I had seen in the two years that looked the way she did, perfect, styled, out of place on the doorstep of this cottage. But she didn't look too dissimilar, in the end. Her hair was tied up, but loose, stringy, like she had fixed it countless on the journey here, nevertheless. I noticed when she sat down that her nails were chipped. She didn't look any more perfect than R, my first guest.

Remember I said that journey from where, the train station, or the nearest big town city, remember I said that journey from there to here is certainly not short.

I remember the branches cutting up my legs through my pants.

C was in the dream, I said. She was sitting out in the garden, beyond the fence. She had one of the rabbits in her lap, stroking its soft fur, humming to herself. A song from the cities, from my past,

something I don't hear on the television or the radio stations on the television. But not a song I can remember, I suppose, just a song that sounds older, that sounds distant. Or maybe she sounded distant, just her voice, her sound. The rabbit wanted to bound free, but every stroke, every pet, reeled it back in, reminded it that somehow her fingers were all that mattered. That is just my assumption, from the slowed down reaction of the rabbit, a sudden shift, until moments later it would squirm around again. The dream froze, played again, and the rabbit never squirmed. I was dreaming up that the rabbit wanted to be free, within the dream, surreal, until the woman's face didn't look like C's anymore. It had never looked like C's; I was copying her likeness over where I needed a face for a woman.

I was dreaming of something I remember from one of the books, swapping in the things I've seen in my own life, the woman guest, the rabbits outside, the garden. That fence.

Now I lie awake and only an hour has passed.

There's a tap on the window, and I wonder if for once I won't be disappointed by flung branches or wind. Or rain, more droplets.

But I don't want to turn the light on, in case across the hall, U notices.

Unless U is knocking on the window, but that wouldn't make a sliver of sense, when he seems so sure of himself that today, and tomorrow morning, is just a formality and then he'll be on his way back home, and he'd tell them they must send B back next time, or L, or R. Or C.

It won't be U knocking on the window, if someone is knocking at all.

It could just be a rock.

I move my legs out from under the covers, a little bit of a breeze circling my toes, and then the feel of wooden flooring on my soles. I straighten myself up, brush off sleep, stare around in the darkness. I don't have a phone, so I don't have easy light. I don't bring a torch with me into my bedroom, that wouldn't make any sense. I don't want to turn on the overhead light, the ceiling light.

If someone has come to whisk me away or burn me to death or knock on my window, U cannot know. If this someone is the someone I hope for it to be...U cannot know.

I cross over to the window, inching my way. In the cover of darkness, anyone could come see me, when there isn't any surveillance over the whole house. I am not something for them to guard. I am something they have hidden out here, like buried treasure, yet I wouldn't sell well, or at all. I hold no secrets. No one before has come knocking on my window – so I shouldn't expect a miracle, especially tonight, the night with U sleeping in the other room. I couldn't be whisked away, or burnt to death, or anything similar, without him leaping out of his bed, across the room with rope or water or a fire extinguisher, ending everything. I start to wind up the blinds.

Slow, annoying things.

Pause. The outside world is moonlight and bold, dark, moody, gleaming with midnight bugs, teaming with them. There is someone outside the window, tapping on the glass, a lantern in their other hand. Illuminating their face, making them seem pumpkin-scary. Once my eyes adjust, I can take in who stands there, probably rustling up against weeds, or long grass. I always forget to bother with the sides of the house. The blind is away now, an empty space in front of me. Empty except for the glow of light and the head and the body. Him.

U's halo light dulls as he knocks again, glaring at me. He looks tired, but no more than I probably do, messed hair and purplish rings under my eyes. No time to go check in the mirror, not that there is some necessity to see how worn down I look. U is pointing to where the window slides up. He wants me to follow him outside, then.

He's a psycho, then.

I glance back at the bed, the offer of sleep, before I shove up the window and climb outside.

The smell left behind after rain envelopes me immediately, but I realise I've forgotten something. U is closing the window behind me, whispering about how he'll be able to help me back in, don't worry about that. I promise him I'm not worried. I can break back into my own little cottage.

U. Explain something to me, U.

"Why did you knock on my window," I mutter out, the long grass rustling against my thighs.

I can barely make out his face in the dark, what with the lantern now illuminating the path in front of us. I assume he's grinning wildly, some maniac, for dragging me out of bed out the window.

"Why are we out here?"

He makes a small step out of his hands, near the fence. "Climb over," he says, simply, not yet answering my question, any of my questions. He stands still, waiting. In a few swift moves, I manage to shove myself over the fence, and he follows behind, scaling it with ease. The fence has always been short, stout, but flat, without easy footholds or handholds or holds of any sort, really. All it holds is the garden within it, and the house, and usually, me. The grass crinkles underneath my feet. He's slinging a backpack off his shoulders now, the first time I notice it, with the lantern down on the ground illuminating the area around us. He tosses me a pair of boots and socks.

"You don't want to slice your feet open," he says, zipping the backpack up again. ' "

"Where are we going now?"

He glances at me, his face aglow in the lantern light. "Keep walking with me and I'll explain things, okay?" He slings the backpack over his shoulders again, reaching down for the lantern. I try to rub more of the sleep from my eyes, from my brain, as we keep pushing forward, and I watch everything beneath my feet, even with the socks and the boots on now. He keeps a steady pace, pausing for split seconds here and there to check the lantern, to check me. If I turn back, try to search out my cottage, I see nothing but dark.

I try not to pester him with questions, though I have an eternity of them.

We've been trekking for fifteen minutes or so when he answers the first of my questions.

"I couldn't take you out the front door," he mutters, "so the window had to do."

He pauses, checking on me behind him. "Are you cold?" He offers the backpack again.

I nod, and he stops to rifle through the contents again, moving around a water bottle, a spare pair of pants, spare everything clothing-wise, until he finds a jumper and tosses it over to me. He didn't have the backpack when he arrived, he was carrying barely anything. He could've tucked it down the side before he knocked on the door.

Once I've snuggled into the jumper, having awkwardly put it on in the semi-dark, we continue walking again, and a few paces ahead, he answers another one of my questions.

"You'll be back in bed in two hours," he says, "but I have a few things to explain first."

After a while, we reach another cottage like mine, buried deep in the woods. It is darker, it is more enveloped in tree branches and ivy and weeds, but the doors are the same, the windows the same. He unlocks the door and leads me inside, straight into one of the back rooms, an emptied-out bedroom with just a few chairs, a table, and a television.

"Don't worry, I don't come here to watch you," he whispers out, dumping the backpack near the table. He moves to the television, flicks it on, a channel stuttering into life, and he flicks a few buttons on the remote to get the right volume, the right brightness, the right channel – another cooking show, with a female host. He offers up the chair to the right, where he takes the one to the left. Dining chairs with cushions, soft on the butt. Patterns of flowers and stems.

This is where some of the others, R, C, wanted to send you. He says it staring straight ahead at the television, watching with intention the show playing, somehow, in the middle of the night. I suppose I've never checked to see what airs when I am asleep.

I almost ask why, but I pause, and a soft breath comes out instead. *Why* is never answered for me, *why* is not for me to know – a man named Y hasn't come to visit me, either. No, the *why* of things was left in the dust for me the day I stepped off that train. Thinking about it forces me to inhale smoke, forces me to remember the taste of train-carriage food and pulp-free juice and the sounds, too, mostly coughing and squeaking, but sometimes music sounds, too.

When you bury something deeper, darker, in the far reaches of a human hand, it is forgotten, and for the very best purpose, likely never seen again.

"You are lucky they haven't fallen back on this idea," he says, squinting at the television screen.

He straightens himself up, glancing over at me. I've thought it best to not respond much when the guests, the visitors, talk at me, rather than asking questions of me. When they ask me how the weather has been, I say, oh lovely, rain here and there, sunny every other hour. When they tell me things are changing, I keep my lips shut in case any word I might say would mean the change is a bullet in my brain.

He turns back to the television, back to the cooking channel show.

"B won't be coming back, I hope you realise."

I tense up a little, the feeling when plans change, plans fall through and you must now scramble. B won't be coming back means B won't knock on the door, B won't come inside, B failed, B fucked up, B is a damn idiot.

At least in the semi-darkness I can hide my face, not that it expresses much. I can hide my disappointment, my melancholia, all of everything, because I have been practicing and prepping for five years straight. Beside me, U is still watching the television, barely changing his own tune too.

I can say B seduced me.

"I understand why you tried, Alistair" he says, the first time I've heard my real name in five years. It rolls off his tongue like he barely recognizes the taste of it himself, having probably referred to me as "Subject A" or "cottage cheese" or something odd like that for the past five years. He's said every syllable, every letter, each bit so perfectly, and yet I hear his disappoint, his undertone of betrayal and regret. But he takes another breath, staring out at the television, now as if nothing has happened at all.

"It was always a temptation," I mutter out, thinking of that night with B. Us in the guest bedroom, when he, only he, should've been. B won't be coming back.

"Of course it was," he says, turning the volume up once. He shifts himself in the chair, glancing over to me, a smile that means many a thing. "He was the wrong one to trust, Alistair."

The woman on the cooking show is taking her roasted chicken out of the oven, setting it down on the bench. She almost burns herself but grits her teeth through it. U is watching it intently again, a child again, watching cartoons on a Saturday morning. No, less intensity. He watches the woman slip the too-small oven mitts off her hands, down onto the counter.

"I don't care to know what you did to mess with B's head," he mutters out.

"He knocked on my bedroom door, late at night –"

He pauses, sighing. "Maybe he did, maybe you knocked on his." He glances over at me, smiling. "You must be glad we don't have any cameras in the house, or in the bedroom, nothing like that."

I remember the knock. My fingers against the wood of the door, the guest room door.

I thought I was tough shit for having the courage.

"Alistair, I suggested it'd be best I came. The others wanted to ice you for this."

I remember the sound of his footsteps, without hesitation, without that sense to just ignore it like a gust of wind or a slapping branch. He'd had a shirt and pants on when he opened the door.

"You've never been trouble for us," he says, talking over the woman on the television, her recipe now for some sort of sickly-sweet dessert. He hears the word lemon and snaps to look at her, shaking the yellow citrus around in the air, like some late-night commercial. "You just need company."

I remember the way he stood there, with the light on now, looking like a different human altogether, looking like someone I could've known however many years ago.

And he smiled, and he asked me, what can I do for you?

U picks up the remote again, turning up the volume another notch. "There was always a chance for change for you," he says, setting the remote down, "but you seemed so convinced coming out here, living like this, would be the only thing left for you to do."

B is removing his shirt, I'm closing the door behind me.

"How my mind works has changed in five years," I mutter out.

U takes another look at me, pausing, his face is a form of disarray of its own. The glow of the television is caught on him against, like lantern light again. The door is tightly shut.

B and I kiss.

"We never should have offered some distraught boy a place to hide from other people like this," he says, his voice so ethereally different than the voice of the U that I welcomed into the house today, that I said goodnight to, even that I climbed out of a window for. He's levelling down for me, like his title, like his job here, is being stripped away from him.

B helps me strip out of my pants, he stares at the bulge in my underwear, starting to grow toward him, he's touching me as much as he can as if every inch of my body needs to be accounted for, but it's not as if I can't tear down my pants without him. He cups my ass, he squeezes.

U is back to watching the woman open the refrigerator.

"At least you've had five years to forgive, forget, move on..."

I grimace. "When nothing else happens in your life, your last regret haunts you, five years straight." The woman on the screen cuts to a commercial break, a program that seems to draw out, and out, and out. U dips his head, staring down at the carpet.

I feel like I've been dirty, chaotic, trying to flee from my job to be with someone that promises me everything, things he can't offer me.

I watch him walk out the door that next morning, dressed again, back to normal again, with the little piece of disaster in his head...help him free...get him the hell away from the cottage, the village, the people, the other guests that lay their head eventually upon guest room pillow, the rabbits. The stray cat. I should have expected him to fail, to be caught out, to send me to this replica cottage with two-sides U, he who silences me yet understands with me still.

U takes another breath, staring at the television. "Would you change your mind?"

I know he means, would I go back and decide not to, decide not to mess around with B, decide not to stay in a cottage in the middle of nowhere for five years, decide not to fall in love, decide not to —

None of those things were my choice. I shut my eyes to blink, to take little baby breaths, and I had stepped in the mess I was creating. Accidents happen as often as blind treading, purposeful blind treading. My hands have always been bound to my back.

I was nineteen when I met Joe. He was — probably still is — this vision of white boy handsome, just watered down for his age, and an unconventional nose from his grandfather. I had yet to spend five long, winding, boring years living in a cottage — I was living with my divorced mother and her mother, a widow, a woman that decided to go back to studying despite her age, because she was bored. Joe asked me on a date for a Friday night, the 12th, I'll always remember it. He looked perfect.

I always assumed his worst flaws were non-existent — how could a man like him become a destruction? First mistake, I suppose.

Joe and I dated for a few years, started living together, when everything seemed destined for that wedding my mother wanted for me, albeit less straight and narrow. She begged and begged for Joe

to become an official member of the family. I was in a romantic comedy back then, where now I sit in much of a stagnant, comfortable or not. I had a life, I had future promise and then I had betrayal and conflict and war became normal for me. I expected Joe to cheat, if anything. And he did.

I watch the little woman on the television spring back into life.

He met someone from work, he said. But I could bury that, I could feed it to the monster under my bed and move on, because some stranger from work did not propel me into this new life, that emptied-out-of-emotion cottage in the middle of wild nowhere. I told him, I said I can forgive forget all that piece-by-piece “how to be happy in an evolving relationship” helpfulness they spin in the self-help segments, well, how to be happy or how to dump a man, that sort of thing.

Joe choked me one night, a Tuesday.

He'd started to get angry with me, he did a few times, really, said I didn't do this, there were dishes in the sink, there were weeds growing sky-high outside, in the garden. Rabbits could hide between them, curtains. It sprung from there, the things I was failing at, the problems I stumbled into by being human, by losing my grandmother. I had wanted to tear out the parts of him that liked hurting me, but I wouldn't step any closer, because I still loved his face, I still loved that man standing there. He took a few steps forward, I tried retaliation with my words, he tore deeper, strung up hate deeper, *I fucked Ryan when I thought you'd stop giving a shit about sex with me*. I saw in my head him thrusting back and forth into work stranger after work stranger, as if it was more than Ryan, how could I possibly know.

I told him to fuck off.

He pressed his fingers around my throat and squeezed.

When I gave myself over to B, when I thought the world was nothing more than B and I, a tiny rest in peace sign jabbed into my heart fluttered free, unstuck from thick cement. It was a key. B was a key, is a key, U is a key. The television with the woman and her lemons, somehow, just miniature keys. Each little, big, exploding moan that night was a key.

U glances over at me, slumping down in the chair, my eyes glued to the screen. Sometimes I'll wake in the middle of the night and feel hands around my throat. Sometimes I press my own hands there, to stimulate how it felt. I try not to squeeze, but we are not all perfected.

When they told me, Alistair, we won't have any cameras inside the house, only out the front to monitor visitors, something inside of me relaxed, fell back on its haunches. For however many days, nights, weeks, months...years...the cottage bubble would keep me thinking those days the memories would creep back in, inhibit me from doing much of anything, were not going to be monitored. They weren't going to be for R, or for C, or for L, not even for B. Not for U.

Or you.

A few minutes, I end up lying down on the floor, with the television to my right, the glow of it leaping out at me. But I've stopped paying attention to see whether it's still the cooking show woman, or if it some other show now, something else for U to be distracted by. I just wanted a moment to stare up at the ceiling from way below. U noticed, and he wondered why, but he didn't question it much. He's started to shift in his chair, perhaps unsure if he should follow suit, join me on the carpet. Join me in staring at the ceiling, wondering what it would be like staring at the carpet from up there, everything flipped around.

“If you want to tap out, A,” he whispers, after muting the television, “I can take your place.”

He unmutes the television, and I listen in, an ad about a new product of some sort. Something I couldn't want, or need, something I'll burn out of my memories once I leave this little cottage. I try to think about his offer, but I just think of lemons, and the ad, and marks.

I've almost grown fond of not having a life beyond the cottage, the garden, the village.

I try to think of where my life could go if I left the cottage behind and took the train again. For one, would I remember the right etiquette, would I remember not to leave anything behind? I can start to think about the life I could have back home, with a proper job again, family again, maybe a roommate again. Maybe I could fall in love again, properly this time. No more being blinded by how he succeeds in hiding his flaws. I would fall apart with that, I just know. I would again be blinded by his smile, his eyes, the way he compliments me. B is, B was, no different.

But then U would become me. U would spend hours tearing out weeds, tearing out his hair, gnawing on biscuits, gnawing on the endless free time thrown at him with such a mess of time, such an emptiness. I can see him in my bed, his bed now. Another night of sleepless thinking, perhaps a dream or nightmare or two if he can sleep, if he can drift off.

The things we do to escape.

U turns off the television, replacing the remote where he found it. I sit back up, following him around the room with my eyes. He moves over to his backpack, sighing heavy to himself. "I never asked if you wanted a change of clothes," he says, digging through the contents of the bag, the spare clothes, the water bottle, all that. He takes a swig of water, the backpack still wide open. "Pointless, now."

He packs everything he needs to back in and lifts the lantern again, ushering me out of the room. I see that television for the last time and then we're making our way to the front door again, and he locks the door behind us. Outside is dark, enveloping, curious, but almost safer than the emptied replica of my cottage, which could feel like a tomb if I stared around too harshly. We're back amid woodland before he speaks again.

"I was serious about the offer," he whispers, lifting the lantern a little higher. He lifts his feet over a rock or a log or something, and I follow suit.

"I knew what I was signing up for."

He pauses, stopping in his tracks, and he sighs. "You barely know anything about out here."

"I accepted that," I whisper, "I wouldn't want to know if there's a nuclear bomb buried under the house, or a thousand bodies in the garden, or even a vial of poison in a cupboard."

He swings the lantern to his left, then to his right. Surveying the land a little more, I suppose. We keep on forward, neither of us taking a tumble off into a ravine or running smack into a tree. He could have sense memory of the way, if he's been to that replica-cottage plenty before, even in the complete darkness. Well, he's got the lantern. He seems to wave it around at the perfect moments to know this way or that, bound over this log or that.

"Because you know basically nothing, you can return to life before this, just like that," he says, pausing again, turning properly to look at me. His face a glow again. "It'll never be an option for me."

"Live with me, then." There is something stuck on his face, some feeling. "You said yourself I need the company, the someone there to keep me from insanity."

He pauses, hesitates, before turning back and continuing on, closer and closer towards my home again, the cottage again. He dips his head, watching the lantern light dance.

"We hardly know each other, Alistair."

"Since when has all of this been about knowing things?" I whisper, pausing him, again. He holds the lantern close to me. "I can't promise we'll always get along; I can't promise anything. I'm just tired." He moves the lantern back away, shrouding my face in darkness more and more, but now I can see his face better, his smile more clearly.

We continue walking back towards the cottage, almost silently. The time has worn on a little since the tapping, since he brought me outside and over the fence, but the world beyond the house remains trapped in darkness, or welcomed in it, either way. Either way it is dark, and without the jumper, I'd have been freezing. The cold only seems to get colder.

He begins to boost me over the fence again and I cling to the wood before I feel the long grass against my legs again, and the weeds that tickle me. He climbs back over too, brushing off the dirt off his hands, off onto his pants. "I'll change inside again," he whispers, retrieving the lantern from me. I'd held it when he was climbing over again, the warmth of the glow comforting, and then overwhelming. He pauses, sighing again. Neither of us move, for this moment here. Maybe he is still mulling. I am still mulling. I am still caught thinking, *I could go home*.

But home changes in five years, five different years, where I'm staying in this cottage now.

U and I look at each other, lit by the light of the lantern, not knowing what next to say.

He speaks anyway. "I have to head back tomorrow; I have the train ticket." He pauses, stepping forward, tearing up a handful of the weeds. "But I'll come back in a few days." He goes to change his mind, shake his head, but he stops himself, walking over to the outside bin. He sets the lantern down and lifts the lid. A chill of wind strikes me. U empties his hands of the weeds, watching them collide with each other, fall haphazardly into the metal bin.

"This place can become hell," I whisper, not sure if I'm trying to convince him or steer him away. Sometimes being alone in this cottage helps, other times you wind yourself up with no one to speak to, no one to whisper for, no one to be there for. But U is some stranger I've met just this once, and yet he wonders for what could be in this cottage, with me, even. It won't be the picture-perfect family life. It won't be some miracle, when neither of us know the other. He lifts the lantern again. Something has worn him down, something has tired him. You come to this cottage to escape into a different sort of tired.

A tired that is better than heartache, or pain.

We start to wander back towards the window that leads into my bedroom when I notice that it lies opened, slightly ajar, enough for a body to slink inside. When I remember we closed it.

He's waiting for me near the door, holding a brown sack like it is a bouquet of flowers. I glance back at U, with the lantern in his hands, and bow my head. He steps back and I close the window behind me, encasing the two of us in this bedroom. He has a torch, aimed up towards his face, like we sit out in the wilderness somewhere, telling ghost stories. I can make out his face, white boy handsome.

"I didn't want to alarm you when you came closer," he says, lowering the sack.

"What are you doing here?" He inches sideways, towards the light switch.

He flicks off the torch now and turns on the bedroom light. The shadows dance away from his face and I can see clearer, the curves of his lips, the grey under his eyes.

It's B. Of course it's just B.

He steps forward, studying the jumper, studying my worn-down face, checking to see if I'm alright, if I'm okay after whatever he just assumed happened to me. Maybe he thinks I was tied to a chair and whipped, maybe he was.

He tosses the sack down on the bed, suddenly, dipping his head.

"They found me out," he whispers.

"I know."

He hesitates before taking another step forward. I want to take that next step, wrap my arms around him, but I feel different around him now, as if the betrayal is stronger than it should feel, because he has come back just to tell me nothing will come.

Do I still want something to come?

"We can still go," he says, glancing out at the window, "U stays in your place."

"Tonight?"

He fishes in his pocket for a silver case – inside, two train tickets, perfect, preserved. He grins like a fool and then tucks the case back into his pocket. “They wouldn’t know until the next person came, at least two months away.”

“What do we have to do with U?”

He pauses, glancing over at the window again.

“We have to knock him out cold,” he whispers, “and we can take anything on him that could help us out, you can keep his jumper, we just leave him right in your place.”

“He has a backpack.”

“Okay. We take that.” He steps around me, picking up the sack from the bed, tightening his grip around the neck of it. I watch over him. I think of U outside, out of earshot.

He could be listening in. He could know what B is saying.

With B’s attention to the sack, to the room, to planning, I glance back at the window. I can’t see U, I can’t see the glow of the lantern. I breathe in.

I breathe out. I listen to his breathing, too.

“What did he do with you? Are you hurt?”

I glance down at my body for a split second, as if searching for any wounds. I’m not bleeding, I’m not drying out. I frown at him, nevertheless.

“He told me they want to reprimand me.”

“What are they waiting for?”

“Morning,” I whisper.

He takes another breath. “I was let go instantly,” he says, lowering the sack. He glances again at the window. “They told me if I tried to contact you there would be worst consequences, but I had to come. I had to help you.”

“You barely know me, B.”

He sighs. “Don’t call me B. Please.” He tries to smile. His smile is weak, but hopeful, new, like the sprouting of a new flower, or a dandelion. “My name is Byron, remember.”

I stare into his eyes, finding the parts of him that are Byron. “I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“Can everything you have fit in this sack?”

“I have nothing, mostly,” I say, glancing at the sack, “but we’ll have the backpack too.”

“Right.”

He glances at the window again, then back at me. His eyes are pools. I stare deep into them one last time, dipping into how much he seems to care, soaking myself in that night with him, his hands smoothening over my body, his touch otherworldly. My own eyes rolling back in my head, drifting off with the rest of me as I hand myself over to him, let him touch every part of me, let him kiss away sleep and worry and misery and loneliness. I stare into his eyes one last time.

“I need you to find something for me, in the bathroom,” I tell him.

“We can buy you new stuff, toothbrushes, all that.”

“It’s not a toothbrush, Byron,” I whisper, “it’s more personal than that.”

I blink at him, but I’m not trying to be some helpless puppy. He smiles, reaching back for the door handle. I pause for a split second. Thinking about U outside, wondering why I haven’t let him back inside yet. I hope he trusts me.

“Under the sink. I hide it when guests come, in case they search the rooms.” He opens the bedroom door, glancing at me one last time before turning away, beginning to head for the bathroom down the hall. “Thank you, B.” But he’s out of earshot by now, and my whisper goes unheard.

I turn back to the window and let U inside, hoisting him up, letting the darkened lantern tumble down onto the grass. Brushing the grass off his pants, he takes a deep breath.

“I felt like crap lying through my teeth,” I whisper out as U closes the bedroom door.

U frowns, leaning back against the door. “What next?”

We could let him crash. We could let him tumble into the door, over, over, over and over again, until his hands tire and he screams and he pleads for me. But I never meant for him to be the burden, the pain. I can't trust him, I can't escape with him.

“We knock him out, carry him to the cottage in the woods,” I whisper, moving towards the bed. I start to take off the jumper, finally, straightening it out, folding it up. I kneel down, tucking it underneath the bed. U is still standing guard by the door, but through my vagueness, B will take a little while sorting through everything underneath the bathroom sink for something that could, potentially, hold sentimental value. Something amongst the spare soap and tissue boxes and cleaning liquid. He could run every item through his head, guessing this way or that.

I will miss his lips, his tongue, his hands.

But I can't escape with him.

I push back the covers, slipping underneath them, getting comfortable back in bed. I could stare at the ceiling, trying to count the midnight sheep, waiting for him to come back into the room and startle upon me, startle upon U waiting for him. I get warmer, I make myself warmer, pulling the covers up to my neck. I read the lines on the ceiling like words of a book, but the story is the same one told before, told every other night. Some new fandangle plot unwinds out in the hallway, down in the bathroom, on those ceilings. U digs around in the backpack but comes up with nothing. He grips the neck of the vase, waiting.

I hear footsteps.

“Are you sure it was the bathroom sink, Alistair?”

I trace the mattress with my finger, feeling through the sheet. U lingers still by the door, footsteps sound from the hallway still, the bedroom light glows up above and there's a knock on the door, the polite thing, before the handle begins to twist and there is a shadow in the crack at the bottom of the door, that thin little crack, where his feet are on the other side. He twists the door handle. I count the sheep, one jumps, one stumbles into the fence, a fluffball and a moment keeping me awake. And the light.

B opens the bedroom door. U raises the lamp a little higher, poised to strike.

I am tired of vagueness and one-letter nicknames.

Byron opens the bedroom door; lamp collides with head. Byron sinks down to the ground, and another whack knocks him out completely. From the bed I take a breath, heavy, and start to sit up, peering down at his collapsed figure. U searches around for something, the lamp dangling in his hands.

“Don't worry a thing,” he whispers, dumping the lamp into that sack, that sleeve for a life that could have been, “he isn't dead.”

His hair is wet to his face, slick with the blood, but U is bandaging him up, making sure he breathes, and he will survive beyond this. The cottage has the first aid kit, a state of the art one, for whoever was destined to live here couldn't possibly ever die here. That was the promise, I suppose – the only way out would be old, frail age, carted out to the heavens for the wrinkles upon your face, or the spots on your liver. Then I suppose they would send another to replace you soon enough. What would become of me if I stayed here, if we stayed here, until that death day? I might outlive U, or he might outlive me. Eventually we die.

B stirs in his chair, hands tied behind his back.

I wanted to be there when he woke up. I wanted to dote on him, one last time.

“Good morning, beautiful,” I whisper, smiling, genuinely, to see his eyes fluttering back to life, to see the corners of his mouth form and reform, droop and hesitate back into a smile.

He starts to focus some more, glancing around at the emptied-out bedroom. It must all seem so strange to him, to see a room that bears almost no difference to the guest bedroom he slept in, but bare, furniture ripped away from it. The walls, the floor, windows, door, all exactly the way he remembers them.

U is outside, in the kitchen, making him something to eat, pouring him some tea.

His eyes strain harder to focus on me, sitting in the chair in front of him. I set the book I was reading down on the carpet, smiling at him. He's struggling to move, straining his arms, too.

"We're not going to keep you tied up too long," I whisper to him, inching forward with the chair. He pauses, slowing down, breathing in and out.

"Where did the furniture go?"

I smile. "This isn't my house," I say.

He starts to search around the room for clues, clues that it isn't, but the walls look the same, the carpet looks the same. The television is new, different, but looks older, uglier.

"Why are you hurting me?"

A chill runs through my body. I inch the chair forward again, nearing him, but cautiously. Whacking him over the head was a wrong idea, a bad idea, but we needed him here, we needed him to listen and comply. I did. U makes noises and sounds in the kitchen, footsteps moving around here and there, but he doesn't come to the bedroom, not yet. B is watching me, trying to read my face.

"I can't run away with you, Byron," I whisper.

"So... you'll remain their watch dog?"

"I don't have to watch anything, I just live in the house, and soon I won't be alone."

"Who, Uriel?" He spits his words, betrayed, but I remain the same, sitting in the chair, watching him struggle with the rope around his hands, stamping his feet down on the carpet. "He'll never make you feel the way I make you feel, Alistair."

I hesitate with my next words, but when they tumble out, they feel true, right.

"Good. I don't want him to."

I contemplate turning on the television for some drowning-out background noise, to clear out my head a little bit, to distract me from the emptiness of this house. But some cooking channel program or a bit piece of news would just creep me out, the thought of how dull and empty the other side of the screen is, where the cameras and the producers live. I blink back at B, hesitant again, but still a smile remains where a frown could be, or a scowl.

"Reconsider, for me," he whispers.

"My life will be better without someone to distract me with romance, with tongues and touch."

"That doesn't sound like you," he mutters, straining again and again against the rope twisted around his hands, digging into them. Digging into him, making him tense. "Alistair, please." He bites his lip. He starts to blink back at me, whine without words or sounds. Whine with just the fluttering of eyelids and lashes.

The tears, they roll back in my eyelids, caught in traps.

I am not heartless, I have never been heartless.

"Have I learnt nothing from five years of sitting in that house, if I run away with the first person to care for me again, the first person to give me compliments and kiss my neck and help me run?" The words drip out like poison, I am sickening him and I am making him sick, but he is staring at me with the biggest, droopiest eyes, and I want to kiss him better like a scar, but I won't, I won't turn my mind back to how it was that night. My mind was terrified then, even when it was psychedelic and climaxing and blissed, it was terrified. The same mistakes may unwind themselves on me, left in a mirror, left in a mirrored world. On one side of the mirror the house is furnished. On the other, it's empty, and there is a man sitting tied to a chair.

He pleads with his eyes, again. I inch myself out of the chair, standing up in front of him.

“Forgive me, B, when you’ve found someone that doesn’t confuse you.”

He shakes his head, knocking against the leg of the chair with his foot.

“You only confuse yourself, Alistair.”

“No, I don’t.” I take another step closer towards him, watching myself, in part floating above myself, from the ceiling light above our heads, just watching, observing, ghosting. He stares deep into my eyes, but I had distance, miles between us in the inches gap. He’s barely moving, now.

“You don’t know what you’ll do if you don’t follow me,” he mutters.

“A ten-year anniversary at the cottage sounds nice.”

“You’ll kill yourself before then.”

I take a breath, stepping closer toward him, almost stepping on his toes. I am hovering above him, holding myself there, watching his eyes dart from mine to my body, but then linger back on my eyes, holding the stare there, trying to change me. Trying to change my mind, trying to piece me back together and get me up, force me up, force me back into my body and wandering around the house, out of the house, lugging my things in the sack (pulling up weeds) and smiling and hopping on that train.

“You make me sound weak,” I whisper, inching closer, stepping on his feet. Bare against bare. He winces, but not out of pain, out of surprise, out of not knowing why, what I’m doing.

“You make me sound like their puppet.” I start to climb up onto him, brushing against his knees, his stomach, resting my hands on his shoulders. He doesn’t squirm. He just stares and stares. I snake around his body, wrapping my legs around him, pressing myself close to him. I hesitate. I consider untying him, untying the rope, so his arms can wrap around me, his hands can wind across my body and hold me this one last time. But I won’t.

He could do absolutely anything to me.

Best I say goodbye with his arms bound to the chair.

I am sitting on his lap, curled around him. There could be a fire, there could be the television blaring the news or the weather or some sickly reality show about remodeling houses, but there isn’t. There is silence, and his foot tapping twice on the chair, and his breath and his heartbeat. He smells plain, but clean, we washed him after he tumbled down. He’s been doing surprisingly well. U said he’s done the training, whatever that means. Everything had to be perfect.

Everything will wind itself back to normal, back to that semblance of normal, once B, Byron, has gone off to the train station again and promises not to come back, now that he won’t be some guest in the next few months, or the next few years. Everything but B returns, then.

His chest is the pillow one has underneath their head at a hotel, or a motel, or some fancy resort on the coastline. Comfortable, but distant. Fabric unlike home, fabric unlike familiarity. His chest is warm, but his chest repels me after the night, to be cleaned, to be replaced, to move on. He doesn’t notice himself, then, when he wants me to bound away with him.

I kiss his cheek first. “You know how it felt, to be held again,” I whisper in his ear, softly.

“It felt like the world wasn’t swallowing me up,” I whisper in his other ear, biting the lobe. He can’t help himself, letting out a soft little moan, a groan, a cry out for it to never ever end. But it will.

B, it will always end.

I pull away from his ear, staring down into his eyes, the colour of seaweed in this light.

“Untie me, Alistair.”

“I won’t, not yet.” I lean in, planting a kiss on his lips. His tongue and mine dance around each other, touching, parting, slipping around each other. I wind a hand through his hair, finding the spots that remind me of our night together, finding hair still damp or clotted from the blood. I remember why kissing him released a part of me. It waits for me up above, glancing down from the ceiling light.

It waits for the goodbye to be over, for the normal to return, when it will slip back inside, and I can go eat breakfast with U. Byron and I part, a sloppy end to a sloppy, romantic comedy kiss, like in the movies that play on the television some nights, to send me off to sleep. I wipe the saliva, our saliva, off my lips onto my shirt, smiling at him. He licks his lips.

“Untie me, Alistair.”

“I won’t, I said.”

He bites his lip. He bangs his feet against the chair, shaking us a little, but it seems almost accidental, or weak, or just a light scare. He doesn’t want to hurt me, he doesn’t want to knock the pair of us backward. He leans forward, trying to kiss me again.

“Byron,” I whisper, pushing him back with the palm of my hand. He sighs, his little noise heavy, his noise almost like a pant, like a dog needing water, like a dog in heat. I can feel underneath me, I have felt it since I climbed upon it, but I haven’t let it change me, haven’t changed from it.

He needs to remember one thing, one something. My chameleon colour today is red.

I plant another kiss on his cheek, weaving my arm up his chest. I find his nipples, trace the circles of both of them, weave on past them. I watch him squirm with a mixture of everything, pain, pleasure, the motions and the notions of what it feels like to give yourself over to someone, to feel for them. To need for them. I snake my arm to his neck, his throat, fingertips soft against the skin. His Adam’s apple. He stares at me, he quivers in the chair, underneath me, weighed down. His arms bump against the back of the chair, they whip around, tangled in the rope.

“Forgive me when you start to regret me,” I whisper, my hand on his throat.

I start to choke him.

I have no intention to kill him, to leave him gasping for my breath in his lungs.

I dig my nails in his skin.

I have no intention to kill him, to poison his idea of love like spending five years alone, in some hideaway cottage with a village that stinks of chickens, has done to me.

I loosen my grip on him, slipping my hand back down his chest, pushing back down on his pants, his legs, keeping my eye contact with him again. He takes breath after breath. He moans.

“Untie me.”

“In another life, Byron,” I mumble under my breath. I collapse back down upon his chest, resting my head on his shoulders. I start to listen again to his breathing, to the beat of his heart, as he tries to adjust his head to kiss me, to bite my ear, to reroll the tape back inside of me again. But the parts of me have merged again, and I stare out of only one pair of eyes, staring into the crook of his neck. In the kitchen I listen to the kettle boil, again.

I start to slide off his body.

I feel the carpet underneath my feet again.

They are just two dots in the carriage window as I wave them off, down at the train station. B has the sack with him, and U has the backpack. B’s wearing the spare change of clothes – they fit him well enough, well enough for no one to question it, or wonder if he bought a size too small, a size too large. He wears the plain enough clothing like any ordinary tourist in the area – he blends in.

We pretended to be brothers, if anyone wandering by overhears.

It’s been nice seeing you, brother.

Give the very best to mother.

You’ve gotten fat out here. Go back home and burn it off.

B begged to stay. I distracted him as U untied the rope wound around his hands and his arms. I told him to be quiet, to sit still, and that one day he will thank me for setting him off free, back to the city, back to whatever life he will have now that he’s not weighed down by the grand what if.

What if the secret to living, to burning, to chaos, to utopia, what if there are secrets buried in this cottage, and I come to visit every once in a while, what if I can discover it? It may be a façade, the cottage. There might be nothing I am sitting on. What if, then, the secret to living, to burning, to chaos, to utopia, what if those secrets are outside, a train's journey away, far from the simple life? There is something inside a cottage or there is nothing, when right now there is no one breathing its air.

I am free to leave it for the village, so there is no nuclear bomb sitting under the kitchen table.

The train pulls away from the station, leaving me behind. Alone, but not lonely.

Soon I will see U again, when he comes back, moving in. I suppose now I can call him by his name, when there is no one around to correct me.

Uriel. My roommate.

The cottage feels less like a post, now. But I will likely remain here for another five years, another ten, perhaps longer. Until I am cleaned off the table like dirty dishes or I wander off to wherever that stray cat has gone. George.

The kettle boils.

I was staring out the kitchen window, sorry. We've been working out in the garden lately, growing carrots, and tomatoes, and lettuce, too. Sometimes the rabbits come, and they steal their breakfast or their dinner, but we don't complain much. How they bound over the fence is beyond me.

Can I offer you a biscuit? We're running a little low, we haven't bought another packet yet. But there are still a few to choose from. Choice is important. U shifts in his chair beside me, taking a biscuit from the plate after our guest does. He takes a small, quiet bite, grinning. Our guest is a dark-haired woman, she asked us to call her H when we opened the door, shook her hand. She admitted it was odd, for her visit, she'd never expected to greet two men. She had to ask the obvious, but her voice shook when she did, unsure of it. What boundaries do you push? I shook my head, politely.

U and I have been living here in this cottage for a year now. We love each other, but it is not the love you see in those romantic comedy movies on the television. He is my family now, when before my family was the bed, and the chair, and the refrigerator, and the fence. And the biscuits. Some nights I knock on his door, I cannot sleep. He rubs his tired eyes and we wander through the house, or we wander in the woods, to that replica cottage, where we sit watching the television in the empty bedroom, talking about our life before this.

We all have our reasons for letting the nowhere become home.

Before H, it was L, again. U slept on the couch. L and I spent an hour, after we'd both said goodnight to U, we spent an hour staring up at the stars from just beyond the fence. It was nothing romantic, it was nothing heated and warmed, it was two people staring up at the universe and wondering why. L confessed to me he heard from B, heard the story B wove like tapestry about his journey back out to the cottage, illegally, when he knew he shouldn't have. Something about lamps and kisses and goodbyes. I glanced over at L, smiling. In another life, someone like L could look at me differently, look at me like I am less of an explosion amid a middle-of-nowhere town. In another life, anyone could look at me differently, when I could be back there in the city, pretending I was not destined to cave in on myself and be reborn, out here.

When we said goodbye to L the next morning, he told me if I ever wrote a memoir, it could be published the day I die, when my story had no purpose any more than to reflect on history. Someone else would be in the cottage, or the secret would be someplace else, completely.

I told him I would never write anything, let alone my own tale.

L said he would come back again, if he could. He would try not to end up like B, or U, changing their tune, but there would be something about a visitor that was consistent that could change us, that could help us live through our lives here in this sleepy village. Sometimes they would send a

relative unknown, sometimes they would come bearing news, but other times it would L with a box of books or a stash of cookies or just simple, sweet words, and I could lie down in the grass with him, the freshly-mowed grass, and we could pause and watch the stars, and he could try to tell me about my horoscope and how it could help move me forward, or not at all.

H takes another bite of the biscuit before swallowing it up, a giant grin on her face, something she couldn't hide quite at all. We've heard some news, she starts to say, preparing herself for a story. She straightens out her hands upon the table. They always start this vague way. Their news is never grand, exciting, freeing, we are never shipped on back home. For five long years, I had not known much excitement, certainly not from their news packages.

I hope it isn't another royal wedding, or another election win.

U taps my foot with his underneath the table.

"The new prime minister is engaged," she utters, cheering from behind her plain face.

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