

Return

It was dawn. The parking lot was empty, and Alexis walked out onto the road, passing through bushes of wet white flowers. He had just got out of another long shift as a 'door supervisor' at the hospital, and he had spent the whole night trying not to think about this time three years ago. He was twenty, now. He was grown. He stood at the bus stop and shook his body like a dog shaking off water.

Back home he put on his unicorn tank top, lay down, and fell asleep easily, a deep tiredness pulling him in. He was woken by the sun, and the cries of schoolchildren below. He groaned and brought a tee shirt over his face, another dream coming back to him in waves. He's been in a park and swirling pink smoke was coming out from the bench underneath him. He breathed it in and it tasted like trees, and there was a tree, fallen, in the shadows, thick as a bed. Alexis touched the cold bark and then he bled into the trunk, where it was pitch dark and he could not move. He was under Ray, Ray's arm tough and sinewy, his hand planted millimeters away from Alexis, his eyes bright as he spoke. "You think I want you?"

When Alexis woke again, his hips were painful, his head aching. He put the door on the latch and went to the toilet, breathing through his mouth, careful not to step on any water or disturb the line of loo roll tubes in the corner. He sat down to pee. The sky was bright blue in the small window. He made himself coffee and back in his room he stared blankly at the wall. He picked up his phone. He had three messages on Grindr; one 'hi', one dick pic, and one that said, 'hey pretty boy, cute pictures'. He checked the guy's profile and answered him, then put up some new selfies he had taken the previous day playing with some makeup. See if *Hung4Younger* was still interested then. When he got bored he checked Facebook; there were floods in Nigeria and a hurricane in Trinidad. The fires had finally receded in Australia. He felt numb. His dream stuck to him, lingering in the pit of his stomach. He wanted to wash it off, to start the day fresh. He stood up, packed the pool bag, and began to get dressed, choosing navy leggings and a black and white top, and he had already pulled on socks before he remembered to take them off and rub dissolvent over the turquoise nail polish.

He met Hamza in the stairwell. She looked exhausted but pleased to see him.

"I have lots of nice things for you," she said. She smelled like bread and perfume, something like sandalwood with a flowery note.

On the day Alexis had moved in she'd come by to introduce herself and she'd asked for Alexis' pronouns. It was the first time anyone had asked and his heart had raced.

"Uh, he, I guess?"

"Cool, I'm she or they."

He blushed. "Me too, I mean, well, I've only ever used he, so I guess, it's that, for now."

She smiled and handed him an orange. "Moving in present."

There was no bathroom for those who lived in the rooms on the top floor, and Hamza and Alexis sometimes went to the pool together. He invited her now and they walked back up together so she could get her things. Her room was to the right of his, a little demon cat stuck on the door, and a soft carpet took up most of the floor, white and blue with patterns like leaves, the legacy of Hamza's cherished aunt. A rack of clothes spilled out at the edges, with shoes buried underneath. On her desk were a mix of hand lotion, spare sheets of paper with lyrics scribbled on, plates and food.

“Sit down,” she said. “Here you go.” She handed him a thick plastic bag she had carried up.

She started changing in front of him. “You don’t mind?”

Inside the bag there was flour everywhere, over big loaves of sourdough, white and brown, and deep down, over the pastries: at least three pain au chocolat, one apricot twist, and a ham croissant.

“I’m starving,” Alexis said.

“Me too.”

“Picnic?”

They walked to the park. They sat half in the shade and split the pastries, eating hungrily, watching dogs sniffing the grass. Alexis lay down and for a while they were silent, content. He looked up at Hamza and saw that she had circles under her eyes.

“How are you doing, Hamza?”

She laughed dryly. “Tired.”

He waited for her to say more.

“Still having a time with the boy.”

She never called him by his name. She told Alexis that he had come over again last night and said he wanted to make it work, that it was something rare they had, and they shouldn’t throw it away.

“And I let him hold me. I desperately wanted him to. Even though he hurt me so much and he doesn’t even understand that.”

There was no point telling her the boy was no good for her, to let him go; Alexis had tried long before. He took her hand and squeezed it.

“Do you think I’m crazy for still wanting him?”

“No.” He shook his head. “No. You’re just human.”

The entrance was already loud, a group of kids chattering, pushing each other, giggling as they made their way out. Alexis swiped his card and went into the men’s, eyes on the floor. He locked himself in a changing room, waited until the loud teenagers nearby had gone to step out. Hamza was in a black one piece, already queuing for the slide which was still open. He grinned and joined her.

After swimming he went back for his shampoo, conditioner and shower gel, feeling his cheeks heat up at the pink and white bottles he was holding. There were two men in the common area and one was looking at him. He pushed a couple of doors before one finally opened and he could be alone. He hated feeling like this. He pushed a few times in a row for water, for heat, and felt the jet hit his body, raising his face up to it.

He used to have baths when he went to Ray’s, very hot baths with salt and lavender. Ray loved seeing him out of the bath, his curls sticking to his forehead, towel wrapped around his waist. Ray had an apartment with wall-to-wall bookshelves, high ceilings and thick red carpets. When Alexis came to visit Ray often bought feta and parsley from the market so Alexis could make his mother’s gozleme flat breads. In the mornings he would make Alexis coffee and leave to go teach or to read in his study, pouring over accounts of Jewish German children who had come to the UK as part of the Kindertransport during WW2 for the book he was writing. Alexis would go back to bed with the cats, two black sisters who walked over him silently, their sleek darkness shining in the fragment of light from between drawn curtains. Ray was still

running the biweekly LGBT history club where they had met but he had asked Alexis to stop going.

Alexis pushed the knob again to get the water to flow. He reached for the bottle, squeezed out a good dollop, got his hair lathered and soft, but something in his chest was growing and he didn't know what to do with it. He tugged at his scalp, pulling, hard, for as long as he could stand it. Then he let the shampoo run everywhere down his face.

Over by the lockers Alexis felt someone's gaze on him as he pulled his clothes out into his hands. It was the same man as before. He was just looking and looking. Alexis hurried into the changing room, his mind whirring with scenarios where the man waited for him outside, called him names and hurt him. It was hot in the changing room. He was covered in sweat. He felt crazy. He dried his hair roughly, and sat down with a sigh. He squeezed some cream into his hands and over his feet, calves, elbows, calming down somewhat with the repetitive movement. He told himself he was okay. I have a right to be myself. That was what Ray used to tell him.

"It took me a whole lifetime to learn it, Alexis," he'd say, "but I have a right to be myself. I have a right to be safe and loved exactly as I am. And so do you."

Alexis bit the inside of his cheek to stop it. But as he tied his laces he almost heard Ray say, "My little prince." He bit his hand, leaving a mark, took a deep breath and left the cubicle, meeting Hamza in the entrance.

"Hamza?"

"Yes?"

"Can I tell you about this thing that happened?"

She looked at his face and said, "Uh oh."

"No, it's not—don't worry. It was a long time ago."

He began his story. He told her about the queer history group, how well Ray spoke and dressed and that he was the first out gay man Alexis knew. "He asked these big questions about who we were, as a community, about what we choose to remember and why, about how we go about recording history, and every time it just blew my mind."

The tightening in his chest was coming back.

"Anyway, one day after the group we had a coffee, and that's how it started. He gave me his number and he said I could write to him. He said I had important things to say. He always said these amazing things about me and I just felt like for the first time suddenly someone valued my existence. And... I fell for him. He told me he didn't have much time, couldn't offer much. But we started seeing each other. Kind of." Alexis paused, standing still. "Sometimes he would just say something to me and I'd feel like I was made of light."

They stood at the entrance of the park; a tree rose high above their heads on the right, its branches covered in a smattering of green, baby leaves. Hamza took his arm and pulled them onto the path.

She turned to him. "What happened?"

"One day," Alexis said, "he—he just ghosted me," Alexis said. "It was around this time, spring, three years ago. He sent me a long, long text saying all these horrible things. That he didn't want to see me again. He blocked me everywhere."

"Why?"

Alexis shrugged. "I don't know." He kicked a rock that was in the way. The words were stuck at the back of his throat. "I guess I did something wrong."

At the end of the park, the uneven pavement started up again, rising up and down, cracked with the roots of sad poplars lining the alley.

"Or," Hamza said, "he had some of his own shit going on."

They were almost home. Alexis had a few hours before work, and he needed to eat. They hugged goodbye on the doorstep and Hamza kissed him on the cheek.

"You're a good person," she said.

Something about all of it wasn't right. Something about it refused to settle in him as sorrows usually did, given time. In the corner of the shop, a screen shone white, playing the women's tennis silently. He stood against the counter waiting for a falafel wrap, staring blindly at the box of shredded salad below. Alexis sat and ate, thinking of that last text message, the words he still knew by heart, thinking of everything he had not told Hamza. His fingers got greasy. A curl of hair was still wet on his forehead and he felt cold.

He went to the coach station and stepped around the empty lines of the queue to buy a ticket. It was so familiar he might as well never have stopped going: the cigarette stubs on the pavement, the little wall edge he sat on to wait for the bus, the seats at the back that rattled his bones. His skull shook against the window. This, it struck him, was a kind of pilgrimage. He was visiting his younger self, who sat slightly uncomfortable in wide jeans, huddled up at the back, burning up with excitement. Now he felt floaty, strangely light, watching streets and fields go by in the fading light, fingertips on the cold glass.

When he got off it was raining, soft, sparse rain that slowly darkened his t-shirt. He was on Ray's street in a few minutes. So easily.

He had fantasised about this everyday after receiving that text message. Every day he had dreamt that he would knock on Ray's door until Ray heard him, until Ray explained, until Ray forgave him.

He stood on the other side of the road, in the shadow of a big elm, and looked up at the second floor of the house. The lights were on.

He walked out to the iron gate and rang the doorbell.

The door opened and his stomach dropped.

The figure that advanced towards him, a raincoat held over his head and wearing Ray's slippers, was not Ray. It was a man Alexis had met at the history club, when Ray had introduced him as his partner. Months later, when they had started sleeping together, Ray waved a hand when asked, and Alexis had thought that it must be over between them.

As he recognised Alexis, he gripped the gate but did not open it. He stared.

Alexis took a step back.

"Don't tell him I was here."

"I won't," the man said, and turned away.

Alexis stepped back into the road, until he was back at the elm, his palm finding the tree and sliding down it as he crouched down. He closed his eyes and tried not to think but Ray's words were flooding his mind, telling him as if for the first time

that he, Alexis, had crossed too many boundaries, had manipulated Ray, that Ray had his own life and should never have let Alexis worm his way in.

Alexis stood up and lunged for the bin in the side alley. He vomited, once, twice, until there was nothing else to throw up and he was shaking. Then he stood and walked away, trying to breathe slowly, pulling out his water bottle to rinse out his mouth. The rain had stopped but he was wet and his hair dripped down his neck. He started to run, to warm himself up, and he felt his lungs open up and arms and feet pulling him forward, away, finally.

A few days later he had the night off and Hamza came round to his room. They sat on the bed, backs against the wall, watching a documentary and eating crisps.

“How is it with the boy?” Alexis asked.

Hamza shrugged. “I’m trying not to think about him.” She looked at Alexis. “You?”

He hesitated, but he could not tell her he had gone there.

She studied his face. “Have you got rid of all the stuff?”

Alexis glanced at the sink, where a bottle of perfume Ray had given him still stood, dusty, behind everything else.

They picked a punk album and Alexis went through his drawers, taking out pairs of branded underwear, a silk jumper, several books, a watch, and, stuffed at the back of a shelf, letters and cards he had received with the presents. He read one, before Hamza snatched them out of his hand and dropped them in the bin.

“The thing is, he would disappear for weeks. And then I’d get one of these. ‘All my love.’”

Hamza shook her head. “It’s over now baby,” she said, and pulled him to dance with her.

That night Alexis could not sleep. He got up to get some tea in the quiet, pitch black corridor. His room was lit purple by his bedside lamp and his eyes hurt from the screens. He had a new Grindr message. *Hung4younger* wanted him to come over. He was offering the uber ride. Alexis checked the man’s pictures again, then replied. He took the bin down on his way out, and dropped it in the skip before sitting on the front step of the building, waiting.

“Hey,” the man said. “Come in.”

He was more hairy than he looked in his photos: his dark beard specked with grey, he had hazel eyes, and a silver watch brought out the light brown of his skin. He offered Alexis a drink, and stood against the counter looking him up and down as he drank.

“You were worth the uber,” he said with a grin. “I was just about to go smoke in the garden. Do you want to join?”

Alexis nodded and followed.

As he crossed the living room, a dog came bursting up and lapped at his knees. It was small and dark, full of curls.

“Lily!” the man said.

Alexis bent down to greet her. She licked his palms and he felt something tighten up in his chest. The man had stepped outside, and Alexis was alone in the soft-

lit room. There was a couch with gold and green pillows, a low, polished wood table in front of a dark chimney. He could smell candle smoke, and pollen from outside.

He stepped out to join the man on the patio. The garden was all shadow, huge and quiet but for the small movements of insects. The pool of water on the garden table glowed pale blue from the lights of the city beyond.

“Want one?” the man said.

“No thanks.”

“Do you mind the smoke?”

“It’s fine,” Alexis said. “I just can’t afford it, so I’m trying not to.”

The man nodded and sucked on the cigarette, blowing the smoke out away from Alexis.

“So,” he said, “tell me about yourself. What’s your name?” He flicked it, and after a while he added, “What do you do?”

“Actually,” Alexis said, “can I have a toke?”

The man laughed and passed him the cigarette. “Okay then. Here’s an easier one. How was your day?”

“Yeah,” Alexis said. “Nice. Thank you. I work nights, so I slept, mostly.”

“Ah. A night owl, eh?”

Alexis shrugged.

He crossed his arms over himself. “This is a nice garden.”

“Thanks,” the man said. “I don’t give it as much love as it deserves.”

Alexis looked back at the house, the line of the low table and the darkness underneath it.

“You got a nice job?” he asked.

The man talked about his day’s work. He had outlined a new training programme for staff, poured over the sales team budget, sat through a painful meeting with the marketing department. A silence followed his words. He offered Alexis a last toke, then stubbed the cigarette into an ashtray on the table, the spark dying in the blue night.

“Are you cold?”

He stepped towards Alexis. He raised a hand up to him, to his cheek, then the back of his neck. He pressed, pulling Alexis towards him, and kissed him.

“You’re shivering,” the man said.

The bedroom was big, a high ceiling over a king bed.

“So,” the man said. He pulled Alexis’ hand behind him, forcing him to sit back on the bed, and leaned down close. “What do you like?”

Alexis could not think what to say. He shrugged and looked to the side, beyond the man. Then, something quieted in him, and he knew what to do. He took the man’s hand and brought it to his throat.

“Mmh.” The man’s eyes shone. He tightened his grip, slowly, steadily. “You look good like this. You enjoy this?”

Alexis nodded, the pressure on his throat increasing so all he could feel was the blood in his head and his pulse, going, going.

“I said, you enjoy this?” The man moved closer, his sweat and cologne seeping into Alexis, his breath on Alexis’ cheek.

“Yes.”

“You want it rough, do you?”

Alexis answered in a whisper.
“Didn’t catch that,” the man said. “Yes what?”
“Please,” Alexis said. “Please.”