

Kindred

The man is looking for his keys but finds a soul instead. Over there, *look closely*—in the corner of the window pane, peeking from behind the wrinkled curtain. Invisible, but there she is. A beautiful, uncontained soul. The discovery makes him pause, and it doesn't take long for Saul to forget about his keys and coffee gone cold. Five, ten, twenty minutes late for his appointment, but what does that matter anymore when a soul is visiting him? Chose him of all people, here in this leaky apartment overlooking dumpsters and wet leaves sticking to the cobblestone. He won't stop staring at the blank space between the dust on the sill and the empty gray sky. If he strains hard enough, he might spot a sliver of light at the correct angle and catch the fullness of her—a face behind the soul. Most people call it love at first sight, but what of this, when there is no sight? Nothing but love that already exists, tugging at him in the most peculiar way.

Like magic, the window unlatches and wind gushes in, pushing out the stench of cat litter and old tobacco. First, a wild gust, then a gentle breeze. He waits for more: a lightning bolt, a vision. To his surprise, a leaf floats into the palm of his hand. It is cherry red, with flashy veins and jagged edges.

“All of that commotion, for a leaf?”

He huffs. Will this be the rest of his life? Always one number off in the lottery, always second pick, always last to know. He's about to close the window when the breeze picks up again, unmistakable now, howling a song he remembers from long ago.

He sits down again.

“I’m listening,” he says patiently. After all, souls can’t be rushed; they have eternity to deal with. If he did anything well in life, it was waiting quietly for the bus, pausing the movie, holding his tongue. Patience was his only virtue, at least that’s what Nicole says.

The leaf flies out of his hand and lands flat on the couch, next to an empty space just for him. An invitation, and he accepts, feeling insane for obeying a leaf, feeling insane not to.

“What do you want with me?”

He runs through the list of every wrong, every unconfessed crime: the power-washing money he never filed in his tax return or the Olympic skater he lusted after for an entire month, Googling her name and past victories, erasing his search history so Nicole would never find out.

Was this the grim reaper, ready to take him away? Was this an angel about to tell him his fate? No showcase of doom or clouds rolling back but an eerie calm.

He waits some more, and the taper candles next to the DVD player flicker awake. Tiny orange flames light up the room, burning the scent of cinnamon and nutmeg. A chunky blanket unrolls itself from the couch, coiling around his feet. The record player switches on. He doesn’t remember putting Fitzgerald on the turntable, but Ella’s warm vibrato fills the living room. *Autumn in New York*, the most fitting song on the album. Cribbage is unboxed, and the cards are neatly piled on both sides of the scuffed table. It’s a game he never plays because Nicole hates it so much—a game he always wants to play.

Was this a date? A date with a ghost, of all things. So strange and perfect, so lovely, just the two of them and the fake crackle sounds from the electric fireplace.

He picks up the cards and finds a five, ten, five, ten, nothing to trade, not worth the risk, his hand is too good. Then he looks up and her hand is already revealed, finishing the game before it begins. Two hearts—a Queen and a King. A date—he’s certain now, and it doesn’t unnerve him. It brings goosebumps. Finally, something terribly exciting.

“What’s your name?” he asks.

Silence. He picks the leaf up from the couch, staring at it for a long while.

“I’ll call you Autumn.”

The record stops, just the crackling fire to keep them from utter silence.

“Are you hungry? Do ghosts get hungry?”

He makes himself a sandwich. Turkey on rye with mustard and mayonnaise. He hesitates before twisting the bread bag closed, hesitates before capping off the jar of mayo. To make her a sandwich is to admit insanity. After all, this is just another one of his episodes. Another dream.

One peek into the living room again, and cribbage is already filed among the other games, but the window is still open, letting in some of the rain. *God’s tears*, his mother would say with no context, no religious reason to say such a thing. *Tears from what?* he’d ask, but his mother never answered, always side-tracked with her flip phone, trying to use all 200 pre-paid texts before the month was up.

Call him insane, but he makes a second sandwich. No reason to (ghosts don’t eat, do they?), but he makes one anyway, scattering Pringles to the left of the plate, pouring ice cold Tang in a filmy glass. He lays the feast down on the coffee table, and when he blinks, the tomatoes are peeled off the rye, neatly stacked in the corner of the plate.

“You don’t like tomatoes?” he asks. “Sorry, I didn’t know.” Then laughs at the absurdity of it.

“I want to know everything about you. Tell me more.”

The ghost uses books to speak. The bookshelf is stacked to the brim, some dog-eared, some with shreds of tissue left as bookmarks, many unread. Their date becomes a game of charades when all of a sudden, a book flies off the shelf. Then another.

Gone with the Wind (a classic)

Dead Souls (he can’t remember buying this one)

The Godfather (one of his favorites)

Almost Heaven (one of Nicole’s steamy books she hides in her oversized tote bags)

He picks up the books, one by one, and laughs. Clever. Very clever.

“Alright, you’re dead and you’re on your way to heaven.”

This poses a million questions. First, he asks, “How did you die?”

Another shelf features his collection of HotWheels. A purple truck rolls toward the edge and plummets to the ground into a carpeted abyss.

He frowns. “Oh. I’m sorry.” Then he asks, “What was it like, being alive?”

More books, including:

Bleak House (he never read it)

Les Miserables (he never read it)

Great Expectations (he never read it)

This reminds him of being eight-years-old, taping cardboard boxes together, pretending it was a boat, somewhere to take him far, far away. No friends in school. No siblings to tease. No parents

around to ground him, teach him, love him. Bleak and miserable, too, but he never gave up on hope. Hope has been his constant companion, his ever-annoying nudge in the side to wake him up from slumber and get him out of bed. He's never read any of those books, but he's lived them.

"You and I, we aren't so different."

The wind picks up, and he shivers.

"Why are you here?" he asks.

Another book falls at his feet, *The Love of Two Stars*, a kid's book, one his mom insisted he keep after moving out ("for future grandkids," she said).

The cover makes him pause. A man and woman, floating in the galaxy toward each other, one giant abyss in their way, but that doesn't matter when they are kindred. Something opens in his chest, unbinds itself, and he recognizes it as love. Terrifying, useless love, a cartwheel in his stomach, innocent and childish. A mere crush . . . on the dead? He doesn't finish the rest of his turkey sandwich, no appetite anymore.

"I've always known ghosts exist. My parents thought I was crazy. There was this one time back in middle school, I swore my pencil moved to the other side of the room in the blink of an eye. Was that you? Probably not. I don't know what I'm saying. When I get nervous, I start rambling."

The leaf swoops back in the air, and softly, deftly, brushes the back of his hand in a gentle caress. He doesn't know what to do, but it stills him and makes his heartbeat slow.

"I'm lonely. I've been lonely ever since . . . Well, never mind that. I wanted a friend, and here you are. I just wish—"

"What's wrong with you?" A high-pitched voice bursts through, giving him a jump scare.

Nicole walks in, wearing her fuzzy pink sweater and Uggs, hands on hips, back from her morning coffee run. “Why aren’t you at therapy?”

He has no answer, none that would suffice anyway. She’s a sleuth, catching him in every lie, monitoring his every email, shoving herself between any interaction of the female variety, even sales clerks, even flight attendants that ask if he wants soda or coffee. Some call Nicole the jealous type.

“The window—it opened.”

Nicole starts the staring contest, waiting for him to make sense, for him to break. He shrugs.

“Then close it,” she says, moving forward.

He doesn’t want the window to close. Not so soon. He needs the chance to say goodbye, to beg the ghost not to leave, to beg her to take him away, to have him fly among the clouds.

“It’s rather warm, don’t you think? We should keep it open.”

It’s raining. Fifty degrees, the coldest day since August. She scours the street below, expecting to find a runaway cheat, a flouncy girl in high heels to be hanging on to the gutters for dear life. Nothing. So Nicole grips the window sill with fingertips as sharp as daggers, painted the rosiest shade of pink, and—

It’s stuck. The window won’t budge, not even with the added weight of her gemstone manicure.

“What’s going on?” She tries pulling on it harder.

“Sometimes that window gets stuck. Don’t worry about it now.”

“It’s so cold!”

“You have lots of sweaters,” he says.

She huffs, then burrows into the bedroom. As soon as the door shuts, he whispers, "I'm sorry. Are you still there? Tell me you're still here."

The clock is spinning off its hinge. He doesn't have much time left.

"Will you visit again soon?"

But the window is closing. He rushes to keep it open, but his arms are spaghetti noodles, too weak to fight it.

"Don't leave," he whispers.

The window lets up, just for a moment, long enough for him to nod once, accept this fate.

Nicole enters the room again. "I'm going out," she says, wearing multiple layers now, a sweater for every day of the week.

"Wait." He pauses as the idea dawns on him. "Before you leave, tell me what your perfect date is."

This seems to brighten her. An occasion to dress up. "My perfect date? Steak and lobster. Maybe drinks at the bar, and dessert hopping around town. I can wear my cashmere dress. Never had a chance to wear that one yet."

He asks, "What do you think of turkey sandwiches? And cribbage. Just the two of us."

This makes her laugh. "Is that your idea of a date?"

Two years of calling Nicole his girlfriend, and this was never discussed before. They've been on plenty of dates, for sure. Always steak, always lobster. He's never asked himself if it could be anything otherwise.

“Are you hungry? I’ve already made two plates of sandwiches.” But they look at the counter, and the second plate has been wiped clean, stacked by the dishwasher, ready to be put away.

Nicole sighs, as if she had expected this. “I’ll eat take out,” she says, then slams the door behind her, and there’s an odd finality to it.

He shudders, left to his own thoughts, his dreams, his insanity.

“Are you still there?” he whispers. But the room has lost its glow, the leaf has disappeared, and the window—it’s locked.

He deflates. All the excitement, now dissipated. “I had so much to say, so much to ask you.”

The room is back to how it once was. Even the books are back on the shelf, organized by color. But something seems out of place. It takes him a second to notice it, but there’s a different board game set up on the coffee table.

Life. He hasn’t played it in years.

The pieces are all laid out. The giant wheel in the middle, the playing cards scattered, and a yellow car, his favorite color, with one blue peg in the driver’s seat, all geared up.

Ready to start, if he is.