

How to be alone

You wake up again. After the years of believing this will never happen to you, you wake up again and you are still here. The light spills through the curtains and draws a city skyline on your ceiling. A place where you used to live. It hurts. You don't get up. It's okay though because he might change his mind, and everyone tells you this is normal. Men change their minds sometimes, but they always come back. Your friends tell you about all the men in their lives and how they have come back, but it's been a week and your phone hasn't beeped.

You don't eat. You can't eat. It all tastes like mould and any crumb that touches your lips makes your throat burn with hot bile. You can't stand up straight and you have to be looked after by your dad for the first time since you were a child because you can't be left alone. For the first time ever, your dad runs out of things to say to his daughter. He's out of places to point out that he went running and he's out of stories about his days working at BT, and he's out of knee squeezes. This is the most time you have spent with him since he and your mum split up. So, he comes to babysit his 23-year-old daughter with nothing to say, but he comes anyway because you still can't be left in a room alone. You've been alone for a month. You watch your dad look at you. Really look at you. And you hear him say:

“I don't know what to say.”

He presents you with a picture of yourself as a child in a tarnished metal frame. You look at yourself, gap toothed smile, blue fish top from the aquarium. You don't go to the aquarium anymore. You hear your dad say:

“you're still this little girl,”

and you start sobbing again. Like you had ever stopped. Your dad has never looked worried about you in your adult life until now. It scares you. You sit together in silence. His hand

rests between your shoulder blades while your head is in your hands. The weeks pass like this.

Your mum sits in your bed with you when the day turns to night and the city is crumbling. She stays until the whimpers stop and she can go back to her own bed. She knows you must get used to it, sleeping alone, so she doesn't stay till morning.

Your mum goes away for the weekend, and you have the house to yourself. She makes you promise that you'll be okay, and she says she doesn't have to go but you know you have been a burden to both her and your dad for months now, so you tell her to go. You take your opportunity to be a grown up again and tell your dad he doesn't need to come over anymore.

You paint your lips in the soft pink colour the man always liked and go to the pub with someone else. Meet him at the bottom of your hill so he doesn't know which house is yours and laugh at everything he says to make him like you. Buy the first round to show him you're cool. Buy a beer to show him you're cool. Pretend you like the taste of said beer when really you want a gin and tonic. Now he knows you're not like other girls, you can get a gin and tonic. He supports Liverpool and tells you about the best pubs in your hometown to watch the games in and you nod and oh goodness you support Liverpool too. No way, you also love watching the games at the Firkin Doghouse! You take a big swig of your drink while the boy says about how the atmosphere is just the best there and you try to forget about the middle-aged grubby man who put his hand up your top the last time you went.

The sun sets and you feel your heavy feet tingle as you stand up from the table. The boy asks if you are okay, and you just kiss him because you are not and you hear him say:

“I've wanted to do that all evening, but I didn't know if you liked me?”

You haven't felt anything in two months so you can't answer that question either, but you let him take you back to his. He tells you to be quiet as you come in the door because his parents

are sleeping, and you try not to laugh. All night he's been telling you about this great flat he has with high ceilings and a view of the sea from his bedroom window, but he only tells you as you are approaching his road that he hasn't actually moved in there yet. You are at his parent's house listening to a 28-year-old boy asking you to take your shoes off.

He asks if you want a drink, and you take a big swig from the bottle of Tesco vodka he shows you. You sit on the side of his single bed as he pulls his skinny jeans off, nearly falling over in the process. He reveals a pair of underwear that are disintegrating like they were discovered in an archaeological dig. You take another swig of vodka. His blue bed sheets smell sour like washing that's been left in a wet pile for days.

Midway through he stops and checks the time. If you could be bothered to be offended, you would have. You stare at the ceiling. The morning summer glow is breaking, and the city skyline looks different at his house. You let a tear roll down your temple and hide in your hairline. You thought this would make you feel better. He pushes you onto your side and apologised for it after because he said he can only finish if he's lying on his left. Escape to the bathroom, hold it together staring at your feet while you pee. Your feet look as white as the tiles in the harsh spotlights. Only let yourself cry after you have left his parents' house. He doesn't offer to walk you home.

You take the long way to avoid the woods and audibly sob because it's been a long time since you cared and it's 5am in suburbia and nobody is awake. You manage to open your front door before collapsing at the bottom of the stairs. You look at pictures of when you were happy through rippled vision and your dog lays his head on your lap. You open WhatsApp and tell your friends he walked you home and you are okay. You then look at the chat you are not meant to look at. The man has changed his profile picture from the photo of you together to just him. You fall asleep at the bottom of the stairs with your phone in your hand.

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You wake up again and your hair has grown but you haven't. The pain remains. You've been alone for 5 months and the relief of winter washes over you like a baptism because sunshine does nothing for an empty person. You stop replying to text messages and are glad the boy from summer never knew which house was yours. You spend the rest of the summer swimming. In the sea, in pools, in any body of water you can find, you swim. You swim off the shore of your hometown. You go by yourself and act like the cold water doesn't bother you as you ease yourself in. You take a sharp intake of breath and plunge your head under the water. You swim until the people look like ants in the distance. You tread water. You know that if you stopped you would sink. You don't stop. You stay in the water until your feet are numb. You swim back to shore and sit in your towel until the sun begins to set. The boy from the summer texts you:

“I know you said you don't want to talk but I miss you, nobody is nice around here like you are.”

You ignore the text but get another one 10 minutes later:

“I'm in a band now. We are playing live on the 10th you should come watch.”

You don't reply. You feel bad, but your mum told you not to reply and you have to do what she says because you can't lie to her and she's just looking out for you. She says she wants you to go and be free and not make the mistakes she made at your age, so you just say okay and do as she tells you because nothing else has worked for five months.

You're used to sleeping alone now. You move back to your university city, and you don't visit home much. It's easier to be far away. Some nights you give in, and you look at the man's Instagram. You hurt your own feelings because you didn't have to know, but now you do, and you'll never be able to unsee her face smiling next to his. You're replaceable, you've been replaced, and you're crying again. Your phone never did beep again and now

you know why. The girl he told you not to worry about looks so beautiful in his jumper. The one you used to sleep in.

You're used to sleeping alone now but you are tired of crying. You get a job at a bar, and you work as much as you can because you really shouldn't cry in front of customers. Some evenings you swim. In the pool where families go, you stay late until your fingers go soft and wrinkly. One night you are the last one in the pool. The water is still, apart from the ripples you cause. You do not move. The ripples continue in time with the beating of your heart. You must still be alive. The distractions begin to work but you have to have days off work and the pool shuts at 10pm. You download a dating app and meet a girl.

She brings you pink peonies. She is intelligent and funny and beautiful, and you feel like yourself again. For an evening. You talk about things you did before you met the man. You listen to the girl talk about the shows she likes and maths she studies and the music she listens to. You don't break eye contact all night. The girl wants to go dancing so you do. You're taller than her and she wraps her arms around your neck as you sway to 'tiny dancer'. It's cringy but she's smiling and you're smiling, and you kiss her because you want to. She invites you back to hers and she lives in the nice part of the city. Her room is on the top floor. It is immaculate. Vine leaves wrap around the headboard of her double bed. From her window the city lights glow. A soft constellation of other people up late. The girl falls asleep in your arms. On the side of her wardrobe there are polaroid pictures of her beaming with her friends and her family and then the sinking feeling comes back. You are not ready for this. You will never be ready. You are not going to fall in love again because love isn't real because if it was, you already had it and it ended and that could just happen over and over again, and all this is happening in your head while you can feel the girl's heartbeat on your wrist. She doesn't deserve this. You lay awake and count the colours of the room.

You slip away in the early hours and sit on her doorstep to wait for an Uber. She comes through the front door wearing just a big t-shirt and asks you why you left without saying goodbye. You say:

“I didn't want to wake you up.”

When you really want to say:

“I shouldn't have met you because I'm a black hole and I'm not good and I've already hurt one person's feelings and I can't hurt yours too and you need to be careful because all people are bad, and love isn't real, and you are better off staying alone and I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry.”

But you don't say that. The car arrives. You kiss the girl on the cheek and say:

“Sorry,”

Instead of:

“Goodbye.”

You delete the dating app. You write. You write the same words over and over until it's the only motion your hand can do. The words you write don't feel like they're yours. Your voice dissipates like a drop of blood in the ocean till there's nothing left of it you recognise. You write in cafes that you took the man to when he came to visit years ago. You sit opposite the sofa where he kissed the top of your head. You try not to look up. You carry on writing even when it doesn't sound right, even when the words don't sound like they come from you. The weeks pass like this.

You wake up again. You sleep with the blinds tightly closed so no light can break the darkness. There is nothing on the ceiling but a cobweb. No city. Nothing but a cobweb where a spider used to live. You're still writing. You've run out of words for the man, so you start to write poems about nothing. You write a poem for your childhood dolly and a poem for the

receipt from the bar and a poem for the ants on the ground by the bench you sit on. You think about the last time you sat on that bench and how the man had his arm around you. You get up. You sit on different benches and visit different cafes. You sit in places where you can look up. You take your friends to the places you used to go. Your friends tell you about all the men in their lives and how shit they are and how you are lucky to be single. You wince and laugh it off. Your friends nurse back your laugh. It is cautious and muddled like a baby's first word, but it returns. It doesn't sound how it used to.

You've woken up and your hair is past your shoulders now. The pain remains but you have learned. You don't look at it anymore. You go to work in a place where the man doesn't know. You write your words that are not about him, and he will never get to read. You swim in a body that he hasn't touched in a year. Some days you smile and some days you do not. The weeks pass like this.