

I Hear the Ticking of the Clock

By Keeley Young

Instead of taking the bus home from work, I decide to walk.

Several hours later I unlock the front door and shout into the dark for the tabby cat, the same one I have forgotten had died four years earlier. The house is empty and barren and the whiskey smell I promised my neighbour was my latest boyfriend's is actually mine.

My neighbour comes around on the weekend, typically warming her palms on a casserole dish, asking me to promise I will feed myself better than I am. I argue there is nothing wrong with eating half a salad out of a cardboard container on the back porch steps, flinging soggy lettuce to the magpies.

My neighbour now disapproves of my boyfriend, saying he must be creating the unhealthy behaviours in me, saying he must be having a negative impact on my livelihood, my well-being. See, my neighbour believes they can be a surrogate to the fact I am parentless, on account of having a mother who married a Hungarian man and moved with him to Brussels, and a father who thinks I rot in sin for being a homosexual.

You take it up the arse, he says, said, on a phone call we had a few months ago when I mentioned this fictional boyfriend who, for him, keeps me in and out of trouble. We have been together seven months, the rumour becoming lie, but now I want him gone, forgotten entirely, and I don't even take it anywhere. My father thinks all the gay men in the entire world are the same. My neighbour is kind in thinking I want children. Turn this house into a home. Make a bed and actually take a welcomed nap in it. Not lay there, semi-paralysed.

At work I sort clothing into a series of boxes. Damaged, which is most likely shredded by another of my coworkers and given to the homeless on the streets. Sent back, which is shipped away from us, further than I know. To be sold, which is coat-hangered by another of my coworkers and priced and potentially bought by someone come in from outside. I did not serve any customers today, not in the eight hours I worked. There was a half an hour lunch break in which I went out the back, waved aimlessly to the mop-headed drug dealer, and pretended I was interested in my phone and not the people walking past the alleyway. I look for the men, the handsome ones. I need someone to replace the boyfriend.

My neighbour thinks he is awful for leaving round the smell but never saying hello, or hi, or coming over for supper when I return the casserole dish. Her house smells like potpourri. There are smaller shoes in the rack than would fit her feet, and when I ask she tells me they are the shoes of her granddaughter, who lives two hours north. I ask her whether she feels like she is the opposite version of orphaned, because her only child lives two hours north with his family and infrequently visits, like my father. This did not go so well.

The last time I saw my father he was inside my house, sitting on the couch, drinking a beer or stubbing out a cigarette in the ashtray. Those are his actions, drink, stub, shout. Readjust his crotch. Wonder whether my homosexuality is the reason this made-up boyfriend—my father is intelligent for a bigot—never comes around to fix the plumbing. There's nothing wrong with the taps.

I try to sit down in the house and sketch the vision of a monster that came to me in a dream last night. There was no time at work, although none of my coworkers were in the room with me. None of them like me, but I had that opinion of them first. They are all nasty, gossiping weirdos. With crooked noses and glasses too big for their faces. I could play nice, but they snivel behind my back.

What will I do with the fifty cents I saved from not having taken the bus?

There is no physical money in this house, I give it all to the neighbour, who collects coins, but not any of the ones I usually donate to her. She transfers various amounts of money back into my bank account and if there were space she would write sweet, innocent notes of kindness and beg me to break things off with my false boyfriend. She believes he is completely alive and in focus. Derek. It is not a name I want to moan in the make-believe sex she must imagine we have, although my neighbour was married only once and had one child, so perhaps she very rarely had sex herself.

How impolite of me.

If I had a lover would I pretend to enjoy the sex to please him?

I have been summoned for jury duty but do not want to attend. My boss has not approved of leave. I will be unpaid for the time off, she said, rushing into another room in our labyrinthine halls carting inside it a large, unmarked box. I giggled imagining it was something inappropriate, like her own collection of dildos, but instead it was more likely another assortment of tiresome artsy magnets and bookmarks and candles. None of what we are instructed to upsell amuses me anymore. None of it is hand-crafted or locally-sourced. It is all merely void of personality.

But so am I.

The scary shadows that dance on the walls could be given names if they lingered around any longer. In my loneliness I can recognise their shapes as different, as being different shadows. Instead of cooking myself dinner on the stove I peel off the flimsy paper lip of a yogurt pot, honey-flavoured, and dip Scotch Fingers into it. I regret the decision somewhat and abandon the Fingers but otherwise the yogurt is delicious, albeit not entirely filling. The lip sticks to the plastic bin liner and makes me shudder. I wonder what my neighbour is doing at this moment, and whether she is ever jealous I have a mysterious invisible boyfriend who reeks of whiskey and never makes a sound. He is so quiet, I almost think I am in love with him.

Dinner was underwhelming, but so too was the day. I thought a butcherbird wanted to swoop down upon me and prey on my exposed earlobes. It seemed mildly spooked by the simple fact I was walking along the path instead of finding transport, seeking the shelter of an influenza-orgy on wheels. The butcherbird was harmless, but earlier in the day, while I was waiting for the bus to transport me twenty minutes to work, an elderly man with a proper walking stick made a pass at me. You are beautiful, he said. Put your glasses on grandpa, I had wanted to say. You will realise I am not a woman, had been my thought. Old men are not supposed to want fresh daisies like me—this an overestimation of how pretty I look, ragged by work, the whiskey I drink of an evening to lull me into sleep, the threatening point of a pair of scissors against my flesh.

I wonder whether my neighbour's son is interested in me, although he has never met me. Does she talk to him about me? It is stupid of me to think about it. I lash myself by letting the water in the bathroom sink run warm, then hot, and with the emptied toothbrush cup I pour the hot water on my hairy legs. A couple of times over. There's a ringing sound but my phone is on silent, and it is late, and I am lonely. My father, perhaps. Calling to berate me. Is that boyfriend of yours making you plead for even a droplet of affection? Who would love you? Go on then, answer the bloody phone.

But it was never ringing to begin with.

I wander into the bedroom and realise someone has raided the chest of drawers.

Immediately I assume I have been mugged, but elsewhere in the house had been left untouched, unbothered. It was here they focused their energy. The bedroom, private, intimate, although the latter applied only to myself. No one else invaded on this space unless there was something within the chest of drawers they desired, and there was, for someone.

I have an old roommate. He had lived here before, in the before times, and there were remnants of him draped around the place, as if he would return for them. I assumed he would not.

The chest caged tattered pairs of his socks, black or burgundy, but occasionally inside a pair he hid mementos of his dead girlfriend. Ill to speak of the dead, but she was miserably sentimental. Kept ticket stubs and laminated them and decorated them with plastic sequins and permanent-marker love hearts. Laminated everything. Laminated his heart, too, and smooched it with her pink-rose lips.

Then she died on him.

Her body sunk against his. Aneurism. She was chronically ill but never went to the doctor, because she said they rambled on the same nonsense that helped her little, then prescribed anti-depressants that made her think funny and laminate her water bill. Her favourite doctor had been in a car accident and broke his spine. Snapped it. Like a stick of pocky.

He must have been here. The old roommate. My neighbour has a spare key to the house, because I cannot be trusted with not burning the place down by leaving the oven on when I go to work after having cooked myself something for breakfast, and thinking it needed the oven to do it. Toast is better in the oven. Or I pretend it is. To rebel.

My old roommate has the same name as I do. It was once amusing, shouting his name down the hall in the middle of the night because it was mine too, and it sounded like I was fuming at myself. He had a way of driving me to the point of insanity, but he was beautiful to look at. In an unassuming way. To someone else he might have been simply average. Imperfect hair. Pimples, which bled when he shaved his neck. A tattoo on his chest that threatened to obscure his nipple.

I never said nothing, because he was in love with her, the perfect lover-girl who wanted to clean our house when she came over, who wondered why there were so many pots of yogurt in the refrigerator and yet they never got eaten when she was there. When she wandered out of his bedroom, which is now mine, wearing a floral nightgown and complaining, for once, about something, about the slow internet.

I should stay off the internet. I adopt endangered species of animals when I am feeling low and depressed, or worse than this. Tonight I am at least distracted by the thought that he has been here, without telling me, presumably to mourn the girl he wanted to marry. When he could afford to buy her a pretty diamond ring. It would have been lab-grown, but he would not have minded.

The socks are everywhere. Unpaired, tossed, littering the bed. My old roommate does not smell like alcohol but cigarettes, and he must have smoked one in the room, leaning out the window. I have the sniffer of an airport dog. Hunting for a bomb. Some of her sentiments are scattered around, too. A ticket to see a movie they both loved, but I hated. He was so possessive about that.

All you do is turn your nose up at her.

That's a lie, I said. But I did not like her. The funeral was one of the few times I appreciated her presence.

I climb atop the mattress and the discarded socks and try to imagine I am in the arms of a boyfriend who does not exist. It does not soothe me, because the last piece of affection I received was from a real, physical man, who broke my heart in the end. He wanted to touch me too much.

I don't know what the time is.

I think if I had been the type of person who requires the train to get myself home, I might have jumped in front of it as it approached the station. A daily dose of thinking about ending things is like taking fish oil, swallowing it down, drinking a glass of water alongside.

An hour or so later I wake in sweats, the clothes I wore to work clinging to my body. *Gross*, I say aloud, to no one except the smell of a dead girl haunting the bedroom. I moved into this room when my old roommate moved out because it is roomier and has an attached bathroom with an old bathtub I sometimes fill with bubble bath or tomato soup but never both at the very same time. My coworkers once mocked me incessantly that I smelled, smelled like I'd been sprayed by Pepe Le Pew, but I did not believe them. I was heartbroken, and had skipped a few showers to revel in my filthy misery. They don't know disgusting and smelly. They haven't been shoved into manure. By your father, of course. Rotten man, deserving enough of the fake letter I posted to him in which I claimed to be a male lover of his and missed breeding his hole and calling him my babygirl.

Do you think he knew I did it?

I discard the clothes and lie there in the mess of a bed in nothing but my underwear, which is repugnant of me. There are parts of my body I pretend do not exist. My nipples. I find I lack the need for them, so therefore I should not have them, and I want to peel them off or grate them like cheese. My toes. I hate staring at my feet. Hair on the toes makes me look barbaric, and I'm a barbarian for living in this house, talking to my neighbour, invading in on the home front when I return the casserole and ask after her son like he is an old friend of mine instead of a stranger I am becoming parasocially interested in because from the stories my neighbour tells he seems like an honest, gentle man and there are not enough of those in my fractured little world.

Something moves underneath the bed.

I jolt upright. Gah. I am far too undressed to face an intruder. I fumble around in the rubble for another shirt and find a dirty black singlet I must have worn four days ago, or so. Maybe five. It smells the same as I do. Should I shout, should I say come out. I almost want to offer up a "come out with your hands in the air" as if there will be an air of confidence to how I speak and as if I have any sort of weapon to threaten the intruder with. In all my confusion I forget my old roommate must have stolen his way inside earlier.

He is on his knees, resting his chin on the mattress.

For a moment he doesn't speak. He just stares at me. It is the first time I have truly seen him since he moved out of our place, which is now merely mine, and I wonder whether he will desperately beg for his return, which will complicate everything. He would want the bedroom back. We'd have to talk about his dead girlfriend again.

'You snore,' he said, blowing me a kiss. He loves to blow people kisses, and none of them mean a lick, because he never blew his girlfriend kisses even when she was alive. When she was dead and in the coffin there was never a quiet, hushed moment for him to pucker his lips together. I never hugged him because I was frightened he would scream the f-slur at me and still move out, regardless.

This was bound to happen. His goodbye, except he left behind the mementos, and the chest of drawers, and a thousand silver spoons. The count is not accurate. One night, when I was bored, and alone but not lonely, I counted a few fistfuls before my wrist got tired moving the spoons from the drawer onto the tattered rug in the living room. I had taken the drawer out of the kitchen. I had been doing something else with my wrist but those details are private. Everyone knows I get obsessive about counting out how many of something I have. It's a good distraction from the boredom.

My old roommate adjusts himself so he is sitting beside me on the mattress, balling some of the socks, not in matching pairs but it hardly matters. The socks are his, but everything else in the chest of drawers isn't, not that he cares much for my possessions or what happens to them.

'She's come back,' he says. Almost impossible to understand his expression except that the worry lines grow thicker and create within themselves dried and cracked rivers. Kieran—that is our shared name—is clutching an unfurled pair of socks to his chest and I can tell there is something deeply serious about now, although everything is either serious or not with Kieran. He used to call me Ren to differentiate, because I came secondary, which made sense to me. This had been his idea. This house. That chest of drawers he bought off a man in his fifties who asked us if we had girlfriends in the sort of way you ask a person if their mother is single, if you ever have thought of asking someone if their mother was single. Kieran had. At the funeral. There was a litany of his dead girlfriend's friends there to bear witness and grieve, but he only had the nerve to talk to three of them. The girl he knew the best—Sara, who looked like Kieran's girlfriend's mirror opposite, draped in a black dress a size too small for her. Sara, and Devon, who he had met a handful of times at house parties, and Bryce, who attended with his mother, for a sort of moral support you needed for a funeral. Kieran was lonely and tired.

Kieran seems lonely and tired now.

'You're not listening,' and he repeats that she has come back, to his new apartment, an apparition he cannot outrun. I say I don't believe in ghosts, which is the truth, well the truth when he tells me he thinks there is a ghost lagging behind calling out his name and telling him she still loves him so.

In the darkness I look at my old roommate and think this is the most absurd way to beg for his old room back, so I move to turn on the light and make him more comfortable.

Seeing his face again underneath the glow of the bulb trips the wiring in my brain.

Kieran as he is now looks no different than when I last saw him, except the purple rings underneath his eyes are expanding and his teeth are yellower and there's fresh ink creeping out from the neckline of the t-shirt he did not iron. He squints at the light and asks, or pleads, for me to take him seriously.

He begins to explain when he first noticed her presence. A tap would turn on. A lamp would flicker like she had learned Morse code in hell.

'She went to heaven,' he interjects.

A tap would turn on. A lamp on the table in his bedroom would flicker. Kieran says he figured it was the house and the neighbourhood, he couldn't afford a nice place without its issues because he was working the shitty job just enough days a week to cover rent and some groceries, he was eating sliced ham from the packet sometimes because it meant he could skimp and pay for more petrol.

'I also just like the stuff, the ham, it tastes good when you don't think about how dumb you are.'

Then she was there, physical, he remembered every single part of her. It was like he was hallucinating how accurate the vision was. Then she touched his arm. Grazed it enough for him to believe himself.

She haunts me.

His voice quivers. The light flickers above us. Kieran and I look at each other, thinking, what a strange coincidence. Or I do. Despite sharing an identical name I can peer into his thoughts no more than he can mine. I am grateful for that, or I have been, when we once saw each other every single day. Those thoughts would have disturbed him. Those thoughts would disturb anyone.

I wonder when the last time I replaced this light bulb was, then remember I have never replaced this light bulb, or any light bulb in my entire short, uninspired life.

Instead I think about calling my neighbour, on the phone as to not disturb other neighbours who would shudder at the sound of my voice penetrating the peace of the night. It must be sometime around eight o'clock, or later. My neighbour is boring enough to either be in bed at this hour or smothered in a blanket on the couch, watching the end of a home renovation show.

Moving off the mattress I find myself a pair of pants from the heap on the carpet and look for my phone, and I think, should I be more frightened than this? Of the rumours that my old roommate's dead girlfriend is spectrally floating around, bothering the pair of us, causing a stir. It takes a lot to bother me now. Chattering doesn't. The coldness of old friends. The taste of the same pot of yogurt when I instead imagine myself slicing into a thick, meaty piece of steak, the bloody juice staining down my chin, down my neck, onto the white button-up shirt I purposefully wore out to the restaurant, so everyone who wanders past the table will see how ravenous I have become, how desperate I am to devour this hunk of meat. It is a replacement for how [opposite of desperate] I am to touch a man sexually, and how grateful I am none come calling, none send me chilling messages about how much they want me to put the whole of their five-inch cucumber in my mouth and lick and suck but not digest. My stomach is rumbling now. You made it hunger.

I look more presentable for Kieran, not that he cares or notices or has returned to our once-house because he was concerned for me. Notice how his concern is for himself. She haunts me. If you have brought a spectral into my house, I think, looking for my phone, still, then...but my mind goes limp at *then*, because what will I do, truly, what will I do...how would I know how to vanquish a ghost.

I want to ask Kieran questions, but the answers, the ones I expect, will disappoint the both of us. There is no true solution in asking the sort of questions you know the answer to. Try to bring some joy into your life. That is the personal favourite motto of my neighbour, who wheels it around as if siphoned into an oxygen tank, the dangling mask poised in her hand. Have a spurt, have a breathe. Try to bring some joy into your life.

The light flickers again, plummeting us both into darkness for longer this time. In the dull, Kieran says, 'This is how it started. Ren, please.' And then the bedroom illuminates and he is closer to me than I had remembered him being, and I notice the grime underneath his fingernails. His arms are folded against his chest in such a way as to expose his fingers, gangly, hairy before the knuckles. He looks uncomfortable, and I wonder why he chooses to be like this at all, instead of doing something else with his arms. There is a noise from outside the bedroom, in the hall. Have we a rat? Mice, I think.

'She's stumbling 'round in the kitchen looking for a knife,' he says.

A ghost wanting a knife. Bringing forth more ghosts, is she. I shiver, but I tell myself I am not scared. Not of a fictional presence. Ghosts do not exist. The dead stay buried. Your soul evaporates, and it should. Your life is done and what a pitiful waste of it. Not everyone can be Queen Victoria.

Kieran and I peer down the corridor, the bedroom light pooling like a band, an invisible gate. Not that I imagine it would pause or halt a ghost, if such a thing could move amongst us. There is noise from the kitchen, a rummaging sound, as if someone is rooting around unaware of where I am likely to have kept a bottle opener, or a pair of tongs, or a timer for boiling eggs. Not that I boil eggs.

We glance at each other to say, *you go out there, no you go out there*. But it does not matter, neither of us budge from our halfway position, the tingle of warm light touching my bare legs. Kieran is leaning on my shoulder but the act is far from comforting, far from protective, and far from reassurance-seeking. If he asks I will open the door further, enough room for the both of us to cease looking like characters out of *Scooby-Doo*. One of its numerous iterations. When I was a kid we watched *Scooby-Doo* together, my brother and I, and sometimes my homophobic father, who back then must have assumed I was a Fred, or a Shaggy, and not a gender-bent Daphne. Although. On forums they say the characters hide their queerness from the world, like the true spooky-scary factor is being unable to expose yourself to your identity, and when your identity is not a rich billionaire, or a theme-park owner, or a sea-shanty-singing buccaneer, then...your mask is the pompous-sounding name of the tie around Fred's neck.

For once I feel the fleck of having some intelligence, and then it is gone. Kieran digs his claws into my shoulder, wordlessly begging me to move forward, and I do.

Being in the house at night makes me nervous. Before tonight I was always concerned he would return, that he would smash a glass window with a stolen brick and pin me down on the mattress in his old bedroom and threaten to make it impossible for me ever to believe his deed, or his action, had been with my consent. My little puny brain would have worked overtime to convince myself I had enjoyed it, instead of craned my body to wriggle out. Or he would have simply recollected the stolen brick and bashed my skull in until I was unrecognisable, irreplaceably so. Blood stained. Ugly and hideous like my soul whispers out to me that it is. My neighbour would be the one to notice, to let herself into the house, to come upon cruel tragedy. Scream. *It's a nightmare*. A horror movie in our small town.

Then she would have to call my father.

Cycle never cedes.

In the hallway Kieran lets me walk in front, in case there is something ahead he doesn't remember being there, a cardboard box still packed or a small table or the kitty's bowl. It makes no sense to me how any of those things might have ended up in the house we had shared for several years until he moved out and abandoned me, and I have no cat, no pet, except his sudden, creeping-up presence. I expect him to piss on my carpets and scratch up my arms and do everything but be delicate, or behave.

His ghost is quiet and dulled. I don't remember her name anymore, but sometimes I call my neighbour Vicky when she is Lizzy. I think her nobler than she is, for tolerating me. For bringing me foodscrap and pretending I am the kitty living alone in this great house, in this shamble of a place, dining on yogurt in cups because I am wasting myself away on purpose, lazy and useless and pathetic and slave to the lazy and useless and pathetic system I am only entitled to.

'It's alright, babe,' Kieran mumbles, at first, before he repeats himself louder and more assured. Is he afraid of what she will do to him, now that she knows how he has continued to live his life once the coffin got buried in the ground, once the procession wandered out for tea and cucumber sandwiches at her mother's dowdy two-storey place in the suburbs. His ghost slams one of the cupboards shut. She must be enraged, but at least she can celebrate his leaving me behind, the disapproving, lonely freak.

In my body I feel disgusting.

Down the hall I hope for the reanimated corpse of the girl he loved, so instead I can feel disturbed at her sight, worms crawling out of her eyeballs, gunk wedged in her nostrils, scaly scabs peeling off her forehead. Instead I know she will look as beautiful as the day she died, the day she was cocooned in her lined coffin, and people spoke so genuinely about how they would miss her now that she has floated on down the river Styx in the tugboat, passaging with Chiron. Also Kheiron, an almost to his name, somewhat modernised and ironed down. Our name, I think, but only when I feel hopeful. To a dimming world I adopt Ren like I adopt one of the exposed worms tumbling off the pillow of her cheek. In the kitchen her ghost is illuminated by occult moonlight, and I think, maybe it is a full moon and he has disturbed the supernatural. Can I find something to blame him for, I think. He left this house, ours, because I was responsible. My simple misery made him incapable of moving on. Kieran worded it differently. *Get the fuck out of my face. You never approved of her and now you think I should never forget what she meant to me. Of course I'm fucking sad, Ren. You don't remember what it's like to be in love with someone.*

I remember piercing the membrane. When he spoke to me I heard the snap in my bone. *You don't remember how to climb out of being miserable.* He started looking for an apartment to live in, but he couldn't afford the rent alone. Would a ghost be able to hold employment, I think, now, when back then I sat in the corner of the room glancing over at the screen of his laptop and the real estate agent website with the similar-looking layouts and the same colour of monotony and the listings from men who wanted roommates who were: fit, young, tidy, preferably women, with no pets. And the unspoken parts: big breasts, a tad on the lonely side of things, single, insatiably attractive.

Then they would settle for a twenty-five-year-old bloke who presumably had female friends.

The dead girlfriend, pooled in light, was picking something out of her teeth with a toothpick. Food, maybe she had rummaged already through the fridge. There is plenty of yogurt. Plenty of malnutrition to go around. It makes me hungrier, watching her delicate and dainty hand scrape at the residue between her white, iridescent teeth. Shimmering in their ghostly glow.

'You look so beautiful,' Kieran says, taking a confused, manipulated step forward. She the mirage, he the desperate traveller. Nothing settling in that stomach. I wonder whether he longs for her because of love or lust, our friendship so naught I no longer know the tell-tale signs. Scratching, clawing, biting for attention, or her nipple in between two fingers, pinched, almost like he thought about suckling on it, a mirage of milk not water. It would be dry. She was never a mother. She was barely a woman, all two years of being in her twenties. Struck dead. She looks *young*, I want to say.

The toothpick gets tossed in the reaches of the kitchen, skittering underneath the fridge, hardly the direction of the bin. His ghost takes little steps towards us. *Her* ghost. They were together and in love but he did not own her, or claim her, just because he taught her the world and she made the same joke at parties about how she liked dating a bad boy because it meant she had to rescue him from the danger for a change. She was trying to smooth over the coarse edges. Getting him to apply for new jobs. Then when she was away he let voicemails clog up piping, like he had flushed down a packet of baby wipes. It would be a miracle if this ghost-girl speaks. I don't think she is here to disrupt us, merely she wonders where he went, and why he came back to the house with the haunted memories of every second of her. I see her when I sit alone, in the dark, hurting the retinas watching YouTube videos on my phone. She is there in the reflection. Waiting for me.

His dead girlfriend's ghost swats away his affection like shooing a fly. Cause of death left no noticeable trace on her body so her new form shows no sign she has forsaken this world for another. It might have been nicer to see visibly a gunshot wound or a slit throat. I would remember she is gone.

Kieran wants to go kiss her, I know it. I feel the weight of my body becoming more impossible to contain within the flesh, and staring at her makes me grow weaker. I should be startled to behold a ghost, but I am not. But I feel worse.

When she haunts him no more I will never see Kieran again, and that is for the best. Our friendship ended when he started to sit alone in dark rooms thinking about everything he now had to mourn. It should have been me whose brain imploded from within the skull. An instantaneous death. It should have been me. I was the one who thought about killing myself. I am the one who wanders on the grass the side of an impossible highway and considers merging out into the traffic. Guts and bits-and-bobs splattered on the bitumen. Bite me, rabid dogs. I think sometimes about how quickly I could fade away if I came in contact with rabies. I am frightened of contracting rabies, and HIV.

At least I never have sex. I can't imagine myself having sex ever again. My sponge-roll body underneath someone. His hands getting nervously excited, or otherwise passionately-excited, and determined, and how he will want to roll-call his desires, marking them with the tick after each is fulfilled. Sooner than wanting that I will be dead, and as a ghost, I will have to choose someone else to haunt. Or stare through a periscope from Hades' town below. Look at the people. Wandering around the place. They have no purpose now. They make and they pay and they create and they destroy.

'What do you want from him,' I ask her, but the ghost instead seems to be holographic, playing on a loop. She notices us but doesn't. This is a joke. A prank. My assessment holds no merit, no one would think of luring Kieran back to this folded newspaper simply to embarrass him. To betray him with the woman he loved and lost. I can't see evidence of a projector, a camera, anything. She does not want to talk to him, or else she can't. That's funny. You got us, I think, turning away, or backing away, moving back towards the bedroom, where there is less disappointment.

Even if I have a miserable dream I wake up from it.

Kieran makes a strange sound and starts whispering out my name. Ren, Ren, Ren.

For once I want him to forget about babying me, mocking me, and call me by my actual name. The women I work with in the store only sing out my name when they need me to do another chore, price another crate of men's shorts, scrub the piss off the bathroom floor. My neighbour calls me Kieran. I call her my neighbour. I am not so kind to her. I say thank you for a casserole, but I offer her no fresh details of my life, no concerns, no alarming truths about the band-aid plastered to my left leg, to the thumb on my right hand, to my chin, to the little piggy toe, although it is hidden underneath a sock. A shoe. *Take those off*, Lizzy says, when I come into her home. *Please sit. Make yourself at home.*

The ghost of girlfriend passed is at the kitchen sink pouring herself a glass of tap water. She moves lethargically, letting water spill over the lip for too many seconds too long before twisting off the tap. After taking a desperate gulp, she swivels back around and stares directly at me.

'**You** are a cunt.'

The laughter out of her mouth is louder than my thoughts. It could fill a page.

She tugs on the lobe of her ear and it comes clean off. 'You know I watch you in this house.'

The thought of a ghostly set of eyes following me around the emptied-out, hollow house makes me nauseous. But a permanent nausea sits within me, still, ever since Kieran had moved out, ever since she died, ever since my father abused me for being a stupid, brainwashed, cocksucker. Even when I couldn't remember the last time I had been intimate with any man. I didn't want one of those in my mouth, I didn't want to still taste the purple of the bruise he left like a Christmas present on my back. Kick the dog, kick the dog. Sometimes I think I am supposed to ask my father to let me back in, let me crawl into the bed under the covers of the childhood room. Make him feel like he has been victorious long enough before I slit my wrists.

The ghost of the girl left nameless tames the distance between us and stands close to my face. I want to ask her whether she would like a receipt with that. To make the conversation, one-sided, hopeless, to make it end and to make her disappear. She smirks.

'I have eyes,' she says, drawing out the s-sound. 'You pathetic worm, haunting the last place you ever felt loved and welcome. By him.' She cocks her head towards her former lover, the man who wept underneath her body, afraid to hurt the corpse, flicking an arm around to move her gently. 'Don't you have friends anymore. Don't you have a boyfriend like you say you do. Is that all a lie. Pathetic worm.' For a while, however long he has been here, the better Kieran, I have forgotten all about my false record. The boyfriend whose smell is mine. How we make each other laugh. He never makes me cry. I always want him holding me in his arms, I always want an impractical god to know I am happier than I do seem. The night is cold, and long, and my baby's fading away from me.

'Stay here and rot,' she says, flickering as if she is light, and I am bitter, eternally dark, wearing a name-tag that says bitch on it, little b-i-t-c-h. *Get in here*, those women I work with call out, like the ugly, haggard stepsisters from story, although I know they unhinge their jaws and trouble me because I am slow, labouring around the store without a care whether I nudge into a customer or ask them how their day is. Who cares. Nobody on earth can travel the world without selling their soul to some devil or another. Money, wealth. Whatever the hell *finance* is. The properties that make you rich. Oil, mining, dredging, fracking, polluting the planet and whoring it out and ignoring the pleas, stop, stop, you're hurting me, you're wounding me, that will leave a nasty, horrendous bruise.

They should have left me, let me sleep. *Stay here and rot*. I want to. I want to hide underneath the covers and wait out the storm, and in the meantime, should I starve, let me starve.

Go away, ghost. Leave me alone, Kieran. I was better when I held no purpose.

The dead girlfriend disappears and Kieran slams a hand into my shoulder, pushing me back against the kitchen wall. 'She could have said something to me, anything, but all she did was care about screaming at you. She faded away like that. Waste of my time.' He left me alone there.

Kieran did not tidy the bedroom. Didn't tell me he would message me the next time he stole away into our once-home, even though he no longer had a key. He was gone with the wind before I could realise I was always going to feel like this. Helpless against nature. She comes in on the wind to mock me.

I went to bed alone after having a glass of whiskey. Too much of the stuff. The taste burned my mouth, and I thought about what I would do if I could choose who I would haunt when I die in a hospital bed some ten years or so from now, having not taken care of my body, having leapt dangerous into the air and splatted myself on the ground. Lobbing around the c-word sounded fun.

A week later I am at work on my lunch break in that back alley I like to idle in, watching the people wander past on the sidewalk near the road. Some of them are attractive, but none of them will ever be interested in me. Not like that, not as someone they could get to know and really care about. The topics of conversation I consider are all bleak and morbid and grimdark. I didn't do anything *fun* on my weekend, Carol. I don't have the income for fun.

I see someone who looks like an old coworker of mine, short, shorter than I am, at least, with dirty blonde hair and a tattoo of a snake that pokes out the shirtsleeves. The snake has modifications, a head on either end, the wrong colour scales, piercing eyes that could have peered right into me and knew my entire story. The glimpse is short enough I cannot tell whether it is him or someone else completely. But it makes me wonder what I would say to him, if I see him again, in my state, wondering whether to walk home from work again. Or if that was the omen. An omen.

I think about omens.

Work is okay. The women do not harass me like I say they do. They are indifferent, because I am too. Talking to you is like drawing blood from a stone. This is something I remember hearing once, in a movie I watched, back when I watched movies with Kieran, before he left. A stone isn't living. Don't waste your time. I glance over there and see someone else who is almost familiar.

No waving. *No autographs please*, I think, and laugh a little to myself.

There isn't actually anyone I work with named Carol.

I've never really known a Carol.

Not one I cared for.

The end of my break is in two minutes and so I leave behind the alleyway.

I wonder if they will wait if I am late back to my station, back to the floor, back to monotony. I am supposed to be sitting on a jury soon, and I have no excuses. They will not simply glance at the crumbling body and think, escort out the misery. They will be forgiven for that, by everyone.

At the end of the day I gather up my belongings, very little, a black backpack from inside an unmarked locker, and instead of the bus stop, I wander the streets until I come to the train station. Maybe I will head in the opposite direction to home and give myself something to be excited about.

I will treat myself, for once.

Put a little smile on your face.

There it is, the sound of the train.

I wait until it is almost in front of me and I step off the platform.

Into the dark.