

# **Whiteware**

by Keeley Young

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There was a logical reason, I think, why my partner had never invited me out to that house in the four years we'd been dating. The house itself, while aged like cheddar—note the way the shingles sat almost sliding off the roof, unhinged like I am—was not so much a fascination. My partner pulled up in front of the house and shrugged, as well as you can shrug in a car seat, pinned down by a seatbelt. Suddenly to him the house was unfamiliar and made only of its parts, not of memories, or shifted eyes. I figured he wanted me to think the place was a thought only on invitation—his parents had made mention of a birthday weekend, a coarse slip of the tongue. I think they want better for him. Better than me.

The house was the unexciting part, nevertheless, because I felt no different wandering its halls, poking my head into rooms I felt I was unsettling by being there, or sitting in corners poking my feet out in opposite directions. It was three in the morning, then, when I was a ragdoll lit by a phone screen I had to squint at to read. It was the fifth night of the month I couldn't stay asleep beside him, and if I had glanced at the date on my phone, it would have read that it was the ninth.

The house was a blank, avoidable wall behind me, as I traced my finger in the grouting concrete of the much smaller brick building. It had been a sculpting studio in another square of time, his father had mused, waving a hand at it. The brick structure could have been ablaze and no one in that family would have cared. In bed, hours before I woke up, shifted to the corner of the room, and coagulated my body, he said to me: 'That building might as well be the property's mausoleum.'

I pushed him off me when his hand disappeared under the covers, and then under the pair of black shorts I wore to bed.

I was curious about the artistry, that's all. I figured someone in the family had been a sculptor of sorts—it was his grandmother's home; she had lived there for at least a century or two. He stabbed me in the gut when I joked like that about his family. It was all playful, both of us laughing, but I would tailor myself around him from then on. It was only around his family that I felt repulsed by him, and in turn, that I felt him being artistic in his methods, if he were attempting to strip me bare and chip away at the clay.

There were two windows into the studios, but the view was largely obstructed by the curtains that overhung. Thick, dust-matted fabric the colours of spring. I had already started to feel myself sneeze.

It had been an old gardening shed at first. My partner glared at me for showing even more interest in it. Apparently, it's rude and impolite to show some curiosity about the past, the history, of the person you thought you were in love with.

I had meandered to my path of exploration unflinchingly. The building was locked. Is it so criminal to jangle a doorknob when you're not a trespasser on the property? I felt out of my depth. I longed for how it felt a year earlier in this relationship, when I let it all go about whether his family cared for my presence. I let my hand sit on the door handle. There was really no chance someone would simply hand over the key and pretend I wasn't righteously disturbing their greater, more important history. There I was on the floor again, dirt smudging on my trousers. Maybe everyone was right.

I was just someone's lost child to them, and yes, even him.

The studio had existed for longer than I had, and I figured some unspoken secret did too. You grow up watching slow-building dramas where they reveal over the course of time that a specific room, a specific place, is the colossal palm in which to hold a truth. I began to worry all of my curiosity looked

disrespectful, like I was attempting to Scooby-Doo my partner's mother's life stories. I figured the studio was hers, watching the subtle expression on her face when her husband brushed off talking about it. She froze.

I was childish for my curiosity.

My partner was half-asleep in bed, most of the covers tossed from his body in an unorganised manner, and yet still clinging to stay on the mattress. He was gorgeous like that. His hairless stomach exposed toward the ceiling. I thought about climbing in beside it, after stripping out of the clothes I had covered in spiderwebs and dirt in the shrubland around the brick building. There was a strange sort of image in my head of his mother hunched at a pottery wheel, nailbeds caked in clay. It was strange because the image twisted and contorted, my mind reaching ached conclusions that, like a fable, everything became cursed the longer she sat there, poised and posed. I knew why I felt uncomfortable around his mother, and I was failing to make her sympathetic. But I tried.

On the side of the bed, I combed back the hair falling on his face. I had stripped down to my underwear, and I was grateful there was no mirror in the room, not like our bedroom back in the apartment. He was gorgeous lying there. It was mid-morning, and any other member of the family could have seen me rooting around near the studio from one of the upstairs windows. Any one of them could report back to him, expose me. Every family event with them felt like a public embarrassing.

Nevertheless, I leaned over and kissed my partner's forehead.

When we ate lunch in the garden, and I felt like the concrete beneath my feet was scraping against my toes, or that weeds were regrowing in time to twine around my ankles, it is probably uncomfortable to admit I found a sort of solace in glancing toward the studio.

Everyone was gushing over the older woman, his grandmother, with the sort of quality I lacked towards her. I couldn't admire this woman, knowing so little about her. She was old, terrific. If he could have snuck into my thoughts he would have wheeled me out to the curbside and left me with the rubbish bins, I could be almost certain of it.

Eventually, then, he mastered the art.

I went on lonely walks from the backside of the house to the front, passing through the tall wooden gate with the arched shelter above it. Each time I met eyes with a gnome that seemed painted with a fresh coat, and I pondered picking up the ugly creepy thing and throwing it so damn passionately and aggressively through one of the windows of the studio, because I so desperately wanted to know all of its secrets, and maybe I never had cared if it made me look childish to stop being left out of everything.

I was bored, really. Bored of the house, bored of the weekend—I strangely found myself urging for it to be over, to go back to work Monday morning—and I was bored of him. Around his family he was passive and uninteresting. I felt cold, heartless, dull, bitter. My curiosity for that stupid brick studio in the yard was becoming an obsession only to keep me interested, and I had no nerve left in my body to just ask for a key. It would be a non-starter, as would the fantasy of stalking back here in a few weeks, in the cloak of night, as some cheesy spy thriller would drill it. Then I would snatch the gnome and hurl it through the window. Or I would smash through the glass using it like a crude hammer. The sculptor's studio felt like an untouched crime scene, without any context at all. I felt restricted from it, and from him, while he flaunted around as if he were a different person near his grandmother.

I started to wonder if she even knew he was in a long-term relationship with another man, because I felt tacked on the side, like an old roommate from university.

Is that why his family thought I was nothing more than a brief visit?

Sweat leaked down my face, and with it, sunscreen running into my eyes. I tried to rub away the stinging, but it all felt pointless. It was late afternoon in the yard, and I was entertaining his wishes, every single one of them. I pretended to be riveted by his family—his father liked to ramble on about his life, with a pair of ears now that had never heard the stories that painted him in a sort of light that perhaps he hoped would make any gay man instantaneously attracted to him; his mother, feigning to have no past, had the sort of laugh that was atypically stirring no reaction from me. It would have been the laugh that would get me laughing at anything. I suppose all of the pretending was not too complicated, if I just thought I was with other people, or I was alone, at a pottery wheel, re-enacting a certain scene synonymous with sensuality and clay.

His grandmother was getting older, sure, and I continued to correct her with every mispronunciation of my name. Forgive the old, I could have predicted him telling me later that night, while I stood leaning against the tall dresser, wearing a few pieces of his clothing because I was still insanely attracted to him, despite being bored of him.

When I rushed inside, I was rushing for the bathroom, dunking my head into the sink to splash away the irritation, and the pain. Sunscreen pain. I think to him, to everyone, I looked overdramatic and insane, squinting my eyes and dashing away without a word. I wasn't worried about the sort of mutterings they would say to each other, or offer to my partner, who I could sense was tugging away from me. I fell back on the toilet with a whispered sigh. I thought about sitting there for hours.

Eventually, he would come looking for me, to scold me.

I reappeared upstairs, in a window, like a sort of Victorian-era ghost shadowed by the curtains. The studio lingered in the corner of my eye, but I was focused on him. More family had arrived. My partner was grinning, laughing at something his brother had said. The ballooned stomach of a woman I assumed was his wife was framed unnaturally by her clothes, but I wondered if my god-like view on this playset had a shifting view of everything.

I figured I needed to go down there, keep appearances, probably introduce myself to more people. Every breath in that house seemed to remind me I knew my partner for who he was as a romantic partner, and not so much as a son, a brother, a grandchild. If I felt unhinged I would have marched down into the garden and pretended I truly was his university roommate, the first one after he moved from his parents' place. I could have crafted the idiosyncrasies, the flairs, some terrific story about a late night one weekend when he came home with not one, but three random strangers (gender: oh they were definitely all men).

I figured a lot of things.

I thought about disappearing down the road and not looking back.

I thought about squirting sunscreen right into my eyes.

At some point, I realised the chip had become a crack, and then had become a great tear. My partner didn't speak to me much that evening, and I worried I was aiming a machete right at his heart. Or I suppose to be less generic, I held it towards his lungs, because I wanted to pierce him and watch all the air deflate out. I wanted so desperately to be let into the studio and understand things.

His grandmother blowing out three candles became a freeze frame, and I was standing off to the side in every image. Still, uneven, with feet merging into the pavement, I uttered an unheard *hip hip hooray* before excusing myself for the bathroom, again. And again. I sat on the lid of the toilet again and scrolled through old messages from when my partner and I first started talking to each other, which had taken an extraordinary amount of scrolling to reach. We used to be so happy.

When he would talk about his family, he wouldn't mention this feeling.

That he worshipped the ground they walked on, but he would abandon me.

I would lie down, then, with the moss and the stones, and just blend in.

How miserable it is, to be bored of someone and yet still loathe them for shunning you off to the corner of the room, or the far reaches of a plot of land, tucked underneath an old tree, locked up with a key buried in some drawer? I pictured the key underneath old bills and receipts for stocks of fertiliser and immature trees. I am not an old sculptor's studio, I know it. For one thing, he has never made me feel entirely ugly.

If I brought enough attention to the brick building, they would bulldoze it down.

I suppose that would be the intention, when the old woman croaks.

Bury everything.

So you never managed to sneak into the one place you found some sort of solace in while you spent a weekend with your partner's family? What could you do about that:

- a) You could listen to your intrusive thoughts and go wild. Whoever said it was no fun to live dangerously? Maybe when you smashed in the window, you found out more about yourself than you realised possible. Maybe there *are* secret notes hidden in a panel in the wall.
- b) You could forget about it. By now, you have already managed to forget about several things. You can forgive and forget what your partner said about you when he introduced you to his brother, slapping him on the back. Do I detect some jealousy in how comfortable they seemed around each other, despite how little you know about his brother, because in four years this was the first time you met him? Jealousy. You really were a Victorian ghost haunting the place.
- c) You could poison your partner.

There was something chewing on the loose wires of my brain and the sun was in my eyes and I squinted to see my partner in nothing but a white t-shirt and denim shorts. He made me lick my lips, and growl under my breath. He was helping his parents weed an overgrown part of the garden—the old lady was getting too feeble to bend over so much. People were starting to think she would crack her knees, loosen out the hips and the waist, I don't know, break her back? It was her birthday weekend, after all.

I failed to picture myself here for another weekend.

Maybe I could convince him to find a new family, and get a new personality.

I sipped from a lukewarm mug of coffee and leaned against the door of the sculptor's studio. It was a nice morning, and we would be back on the road in an hour or two, provided he woke up, or I could stay awake. I glanced at the thick, gross curtains one last time, trying to picture myself sitting at a sewing machine making them. The idea of picturing myself at a sewing machine alone was a strange feeling—maybe I needed a stronger connection to art, or being an artist, and I could picture myself everywhere. Ants were in marching order. The mug was decorated with native flowers and a small signature, although the letters were impossible to make out with the blur of squiggles and lines.

It could have been made here.