

Hide and Keep

CLAIRE: I miss waking up. But I don't wake up anymore. Because I don't sleep. I'm just always... here, in this in-between state. I think the hardest part of dying is that I am still here, but not. Time still exists, sort of—it just moves through me now instead of with me. So the cigarette was relatable in that way.

Did you ever notice that there's always a pack of Lucky Strikes and a black lighter stashed between the broken cobblestones of the fireplace? They always stood out to me. There was a woman here who would smoke them furiously, and the pack would somehow always be refilled by the next time I wandered through. I haven't seen her in a long time. I think she quit.

So today I decided to light one. I breathlessly inhaled, and the smoke dissipated through me. Kind of anticlimactic. I didn't feel as cool as I wanted to, like how we would see Sadie Costello's babysitter sneak outside on Friday nights when we were up listening to our CDs on mom's Discman, because it fit better under the covers. I know too young to be smoking, but reminder: I'm already dead. I'm a kid? Like, that's how I was and how you kept me so I am young, but I'm also very old. I've been here so long and time doesn't make sense. I don't know how to tell you what I mean, because I don't think you could get it til you're here. So I sat watching the swirling smoke dance against the light shining through the wavy glass windows.

Mostly I miss waking up talking to you. I know that's a funny thing and doesn't make sense really, waking up talking, but that's how it always seemed. One moment I'd be sleeping, and the next I was invested in the silly plot of your dreams. Of course they never made sense, but the way your eyes shined so big would make me feel like I was there too—like it was something I dreamt.

We'd laugh and end up snuggling together in one of our beds—usually mine, because your side

was always messier, and ants would find the strawberry yogurt cup left alongside your bedpost. And sometimes I'd wake up to find you already next to me, your tousled brown hair that you refused to brush making my nostrils twitch. I miss our room; the smell of French toast and maple syrup wafting down the halls. You would have a lot of nightmares too. When you did, your eyes weren't as open—like with those you went to places I couldn't see. You always thought I was totally fearless. When those happened, I'd spend the rest of the day making you laugh to remind you that it was just a dream, that it wasn't real.

But I guess “real” has been different for me, for a while now. Things don't work like they do on the other side when you're dead. You don't take up space, as you know it to be. I've been trying to figure out what all these people are even doing in this house. The house is filled with lots of “people” (though some of them are not people), and they can all exist at the same time, in the same space, and only see each other sometimes. I think the glass is so wavy to give them all dimension. They all get their moments. Some try to take more than what is theirs.

There's really something about this one woman here, Lenore. You've never met her, I'm sure of it. But it's like she makes everyone fall in love with her somehow. She's not personally my thing—I never really experienced a “crush” outside of the boys in those magazines—but I do sort of like it when she comes around. She just seems so cool, and so interesting, and she makes you want to remember all the ways that you're cool and interesting too. But there's something about her that feels... not right. I hope she isn't working with that Man. It's like she doesn't really care about you, and I guess why should she? But she has some sort of plan you can't know about. Or she just knows more than you know she would ever tell you.

One time I heard Lenore tell Ginny the reason why she's here is because she is who she is. I don't really know what that was supposed to mean, but the way she said it was like she made it her choice, or something. I don't know.

Sometimes I'll tune into the terrible crying of this other woman here, Deirdre. [sound fx?] And once I hear it I can't get it out of my head, like it drowns out all my other thoughts or ability to even think. And you can't hear this lady without feeling so...sad. Like an empty sad. Like you're sad and you don't know why, like you shouldn't be. I've never actually seen her though, as much as I can feel her. It was actually Lenore who told me her name. She said it's like this superpower Deidre has, she knows when bad things are coming. But it feels like bad things happen all the time here. I don't want to be here anymore, Liese. I know you know me as being so brave, but I'm not that anymore. What if I'm not still me?

And then there's this other thing. This guy? This sound? I guess it's a person, as much as I am? I just really don't like the Man in the Black Suit. He's definitely not alive, but he seems more than dead. Every time he's near, the space that used to hold my head buzzes in a bad way. Ginny told me he's just angry. Not at us, necessarily, but at the world. Your world? The way our worlds overlap. He doesn't like it. Something bad happened to him and he wears it like his top hat. When he comes around I look down and count backwards from 10. I pretend I'm hiding; I make it a game. After I get back to 1, I squeeze my eyes shut and say quietly, "*Ready or not, here I come.*"

And so far, that's worked. I don't know if he can feel that I want him to leave, or if he's just really good at Hide and Seek. I never try to find him.

Luckily this house is filled with books, and I've read them all—from old cookbooks that seem handed down through generations, horror novels, strange satanic spell books, old photo albums with their handwritten text behind each still, even technical manuals on carpentry and woodworking.

Some of your books are still here too! I love that you kept our favorite, *The Phantom Tollbooth*. You would always pick passages out for me to read to you, even though you were able to read it yourself. Then we would take turns playing the roles of Milo and Tock, dancing our way around Dictionopolis.

But Liese, I have to tell you. I think I've overstayed my welcome here. It feels like I'm stuck in the Doldrums. It's lonely here, and when I'm not alone it's even worse. I've learned a lot, but I can't use it. It doesn't help me, it just makes me frustrated.

Sometimes when I think too much I'll sit in the foyer and watch the grandfather clock pendulum swing. I do have memories, but the memories don't always line up. I was there, where you are now, and then I was suddenly just... gone. Not there. But only I didn't really get to go. Because you needed me and you brought me here, and then left. I stare so hard until it stops moving. I like to think that I make the change happen, that I cause the rift. But I'm starting to think the clock pendulum is the one controlling me. And it stops to remind me that I'm not moving, and to help me forget the idea that I ever even could.

Why did you leave me, Liese? I remember watching the moving van piled with your things. I could see the space you left for me. But then you looked over your shoulder for the last time before closing the door, and I couldn't follow you.

I used to be able to follow you into the garden, and for little moments there I could fully feel the grass between my toes, and smell the flowers and rosemary in a hot breeze. And it was like for just a little bit of time, I was home. But I'm not home. It can never be home without you, and this place never really was. It's just a big, dusty house that is always cold inside and your company changes based on the reflections. It feels like it's time for me to go now. But I can't find a way out of this house. I've tried every door and the handles don't move.

I need to get away from that dark man. The last time he came around, I was upstairs, in the room above your apartment. There's something really comforting about that space. The only furniture in it is an old, standing mirror. It's where I'd go to hang with you after you moved—it sort worked like a magical phone. So I was there trying to catch you, but then I heard the Man coming. You can just feel when he's around. The head-filling noise, the hairs on my arms stuck up straight. So I closed my eyes and began to count—but only this time I felt this pain in my chest that made my eyes gasp open. And there, in the mirror, I saw myself for the first time in a very long time, looking much younger than my mind imagined. Suddenly I could taste the chocolate smeared on my shirt. The blend of milk, cocoa and sugar melting between my tongue and the roof of my mouth, the grainy fuzz feeling on the backs of my teeth. I was happy to notice my favorite jeans and wondered how I couldn't feel that I'd been wearing them all along. Mom had hand-embroidered white daisies along the pocket seams for me, and there was one petal where the threads had been pulled, making it stand out more than the others. But then it turned red, and a metallic taste took over my mouth. My white t-shirt was blooming in blood, and it wouldn't stop.

Ginny said he won't let us leave without first taking his cut. But Liese, here's the thing. I think he already did. He's the worst in everyone you've ever met, combined and more. He's the feeling of not being able to hug your mother when it's all you really want. He's the fear-twitch in your finger that fractured us.

What happened that day, that one moment you can't remember. You need to know it wasn't your fault. The thing that took over, it was something bigger than both of us. It's what the Man in the Black Suit eats—it.. it's what makes him strong. I don't know how he found us. I don't know how to leave his house.

And so I'm here, in that spot upstairs again, staring into the mirror, and you're not there. You were always there before. But now I just see nothing. Not you, not me, not bleeding me.

I honestly feel like I have nothing left to give, nothing left to take.

But I just don't know sometimes, is he even real? Is he just a shadow? Am I just looking for a villain?

[Sound fx: static]

It's just an empty room. I was only 10. What would I look like now?

[Sound fx: ominous static; rumbling]

What do *you* look like?

[Sound fx: rumbling louder]

Okay so what if I need to close my eyes.

[Steep inhale]

Ten.

Nine.

Eight.

Seven.

Six.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

MAN IN THE BLACK SUIT: (distorted) *Ready or not, here I come.*