

“Mum wasn’t too houseproud, I take it?” Angela scoffed.

I kicked the rust-eaten carcass of a bucket into the long grass. “She was,” I said, “until near the end. If I ever end up like that, promise you’ll wheel me out back and...”

“Do ya like Old Yeller, I know.” She near tripped on an aggressive tangle of weeds, but caught herself. “Tell me ‘bout the rabbits, George.”

Without regular attention, the pathway had crumbled away for life to spring free. The whole exterior of the house was mossy and trussed up with interweaving vines. They’d be a bitch to clear now, especially with how long I’d been neglecting the old place. The wood of the balcony was saturated with damp, muffling our footfalls as we took the few shallow steps up to the door. I reached for the handle, key in hand, but Angela caught me midair.

“Shouldn’t we knock?” she asked.

“There’s no one in there. Wouldn’t be any point.” I shook her free, but she reaffirmed the point.

“It’s just polite, you know? You never walk into a house without making yourself known.”

I looked at her incredulously, then pushed open the door. Nature had reclaimed the interior as well. It was hard to make out for the dark, but I was pretty an entire bush had penetrated the floorboards. I flicked the light switch and there was a loud flash as the bulb detonated. Angela shrieked.

“Maybe don’t touch the electrics,” I laughed, “whole place might go up.” I took out my phone and switched on the flashlight. Heavy shadows drew long on the walls. It was like a spooky nature reserve and smelled just as cloyingly fresh. My signal had died, probably owing to the amount of lead in these old houses. “I’m gonna have a look upstairs, you take down here?”

She gripped me by the wrist. “You mean *split up*?”

“Well yeah, soon as we find her paperwork we can go. I’d rather not breathe in too many of these spores.” Chunky particles breezed through the beam of light like tiny bubbles.

“But no one’s been here in like two years, who *knows* what could have moved in?” she said, pulling her feet closer together as she looked to the floorboards. “Could be rats...”

“Or badgers, or rabid strays... *definitely* spiders, watch where you walk,” I said, as I ascended the stairs. “If you run into a squatter, just assert dominance!” I saw her stick her tongue out at me as I turned onto the upstairs landing. I *hoped* Mum had kept her things together. As an accountant, she took a lot of pride in her filing system. Then, over the years, it faded, along with her hopes and her memories. If nothing else, I’m glad Dad never had to watch.

It was strange, walking through each of those rooms again, my childhood home. Not because of the time that had passed, but because every inch of the property had been reclaimed by the forest it was built inside. So quickly, too. Ornamental ivy wove across the walls, creeping up and over to tickle the ceiling. In the corners and under the chest of drawers, flashes of red and orange waved as my torch swept across the various hiding mushrooms. Why *were* all the curtains closed? Solicitors, I assumed, maybe as a way to dissuade potential burglars from scoping the place, as if the nettles in the windowsills weren’t deterrent enough.

That strange damp was in the air as well as the woodwork, and I could feel it bloating in my lungs. Dreading slightly what I might find, I pulled back the drapes to let in a shard of greenish afternoon light. It lit up Mum’s desk and I sought through the sequential drawers finding nothing but buttons, wool and woodlice. Sneezing, I quickly hoisted my T-shirt over

my nose to fend off the dense collection of particles filling the room. I was trying to remember whether I had a dust mask in my car when a text buzzed in my hand.

13:42 no badgers no bankstatements - scoping the basement

I'd lived in that house for a long time. Seventeen years, looking back; if there was a basement, I didn't know about it.

I made for the door, keeping my sleeves well away from the shiny residue painting the frame. I hadn't noticed it before, but with daylight pouring through the window I could see the wet film glistening across almost every surface, and from which plantlife erupted. The message had arrived almost twenty minutes late... she was probably fine.

My blood pressure rose quickly as I searched downstairs. Nothing in the living room, or the kitchen, nor the dining room. Was there a cave somewhere outside she'd been stupid enough to throw herself down? I returned breathlessly to the stairway where we'd parted, and a careless pan of my flashlight revealed a hole in the far wall.

I approached slowly, this foreign *thing* that had appeared like a new scar on an old photograph. It was irregular, edges cut away like a leave left half-eaten by a slug, and just as slimy. Vines became roots as the tunnel deepened into the earth. The soil was packed tight, but I daren't touch it in fear of causing a collapse; the ground was too unstable for comfortable walking as it was.

"Angela?" I hissed, the sound dulled with the tight confines. Another message through.

13:56 help

I froze. My chest was much too tight - probably already full of fungus. I hardly expected to be mounting a rescue mission, whatever she'd done. Sprained her ankle: she'd sprained her ankle and needed a hand getting back up. Nothing more.

I moved further in, hunched down as the roof narrowed. It was an animal hole, it had to be. No wonder she'd gotten herself stuck. I paused again.

Deeper in, I could hear a kind of slurching, icky, drippy, something. It was a sound you might hear when biting into an overripe peach, or from a nature documentary when the lion digs its teeth into a deer's bloody shank. It wasn't an animal.

The tunnel came out into a small den dug into the earth. The walls, still webbed with tree-roots, near glowed with that sweet-smelling, treacly slime. In the centre was a woman. My light refracted through her translucent body and I could see, right where her heart should be, Angela's phone hung in suspension to illuminate her entire body.

Angela herself was further down, where the stomach would be. Her skin was dissolving quickly to taint the woman with a reddish hue. She'd stopped moving, beyond the occasional twitch.

I took a step back, fumbling over a loose collection of stones as the slime opened her eyes and smiled at me. Scrabbling, I turned over and tried scurrying up and out like a dog, but she had me. She'd lunged at my feet and caught them in her gelatinous fingers. I felt her ooze inside my leggings and my trainers before I was sucked back. Dirt bunched painfully under my fingernails, but all my clawing was no good. Before very long at all, I felt the flooding warmth of her body soak up to my chest, and my neck, and I closed my eyes as her lips found my head.

I held my breath for as long as I could. Bright light bounced around inside her aqueous belly, torturing my eyelids as she slugged back to her bed. I tingled slowly, but obviously, and flinched any time I accidentally nudged into Angela's digesting corpse. Feeling my flesh drown into the slime's form I inhaled, and let go.