

## A Late Husband

Albie approached me on a Tuesday. I remember because it was the day I discovered a dead bird in our alley, and the dual occurrence took on prescience when our first date ended.

I'd seen him around the gym before we first spoke. He was handsome in a milquetoast-evening-news-anchor kind of way. Although older, he had his gray hair pomaded and tightly cut and a hard, athletic physique.

When he approached me in the locker room, he was endearing. His ears burned apple red, and his eyes dipped to the floor as he softly stuttered out a tentative greeting.

"Hey, I've seen you around."

"Hi. Yeah. Nice to meet you."

His eyes flicked up and he smiled. The odd curl of his lips and his slightly crooked teeth were novelly attractive and caught my attention.

"You have a great body, man." His eyes glimmered. He assessed me, not lasciviously but with an awed appreciation. "Hope you don't mind me saying something."

"Not at all. I appreciate it. I'm Curtis."

"Albie."

As our hands made contact, I felt that his palms were slick with sweat.

"I've seen you here for weeks," he continued. His eyes no longer fell to the floor but held mine. "I've wanted to talk to you."

The awkward pause that followed unsettled him. His eyes flicked away, and he tugged at his tank top.

“Well,” he said, his voice again soft and uncertain, “it was nice to meet you.”

“Same.”

“I’ll—” He began to step away, hitting his shin on a trash can as he turned. “I’ll see you around, I guess.”

As he disappeared out of the bathroom, his scent still hung lightly in the air. It was musky, not the smell of body odor or sweat, but almost earthy, as if he’d been buried in the ground.

That evening when I got home, I saw the bird. It was pristine, almost as if a rogue taxidermist had tossed it into the alley as a prank. I normally wouldn’t have made the effort, but the bird’s beady eye made contact with mine. I used a plastic bag in my backpack to wrap it up and tossed it into the dumpster. After the creature made its thud, my heart stopped for a moment—a misplaced concern, that it had, in fact, been still alive, and I’d buried it still breathing.

#

It was a week later that my on-again-off-again boyfriend Dan broke up with me. As all our fights went, it was explosive and brutal.

“You don’t even fucking appreciate me.” He slammed the fridge. Even in the heat of the fight, I couldn’t help but appreciate his chiseled jaw clenching as he threw the door closed. “Fucking limp dick coward.”

“You’re always free to go,” I said. I was a Midwestern boy, unable to get truly angry, or at least to productively express it. As Dan would grow volcanic, I’d only become more tepid. “We never said we were any more than casual.”

He stared at me. His almond eyes trembling with anger and hurt. “You know I want more. Why can’t we just give it a shot, Curt? You never give it a fucking shot.”

There were reasons, of course. A symphony of them. The sound of my father’s suitcase rolling over the tiles of our kitchen as he left; the chorus of children’s laughs in middle school when my mom, brother, and I had to relocate and live off food stamps; eventually, the soft whispers of men as I watched porn on the family computer, terrified their moans of pleasure would escape my headphones and awaken the house.

Love for me had always been elusive, ephemeral, and secretive.

I could have said some of those things. Or at least shared some vulnerability. Instead, I said the thing that would drive him away. “Maybe I don’t think you’re worth the fucking risk.”

#

After Dan, my bed hosted a rotating cast of men. After every breakup I fell into a hole of self-loathing and sexual need. If I couldn’t have intimacy, I’d choose attention. Which my toned body brought in droves. Some nights it would be one lucky visitor.

Others it would be two to three men I'd kept on my dance card. I'd top, fist, fuck, and choke—whatever they wanted. One gorgeous, “straight” man from the suburbs simply asked me for videos of me jerking off.

I also started smoking again. Not in public, but after the chaotic rounds of coitus when I was alone and covered in sweat and sexual residue.

My father had smoked; it was one of the few things I remembered about him. It was a shadow image, him standing outside the house, eyes skyward, sucking on a cigarette. I'd smell it afterward, on the few occasions when he'd pull me close. I'd lay my head on his shoulder. He was in construction, and I savored the scents of sweat, smoke, and soil.

As a kid, I wondered how he could do it. I grew up in the peak era of after-school specials and constant commercials promoting the dangers of nicotine. Why would he put himself in danger? I'd think of him outside, his eyes looking up, and the deep melancholy that resided there. Perhaps he'd thought it would speed death in some way. Or maybe it offered the opportunity for him to be outside and alone.

I did it because it had been forbidden. Just like the sex I enjoyed with countless men was forbidden by the church my mother dragged me to every Sunday.

Death wasn't the end goal, but somehow I felt all the things I was doing were bringing it closer. By calling it to me, I was invigorating the life that pushed against.

It also just felt fucking good. The sex. The burn of smoke in my lungs.

Life felt more intoxicating when I ceased taking it so seriously.

#

It was two weeks later that I ran into Albie again. He followed me into the locker room. As I sorted through my bag, he approached me, sweaty and anxious with anticipation.

“Hey, Curtis,” he said. “What’s up?”

“Not much, man.” I smiled at him and raked a strand of hair from my forehead. “You?”

“Not a lot. Yeah.”

I peeled off my shirt, happy to give his famished eyes a show. I set it on the bench and dug through my bag for a dry one.

His eyes were on me. I could hear his labored breath—the air was full of tension; it was roiling off of Albie like smoke.

Finally, he spoke: “Are you—are you single?” he asked.

I’d found my shirt and started to put it on. As the fabric eased over my pumped torso, I could hear his bated breath.

The short silence was too much for him. He quickly added, “I just ... I was curious. You’re really handsome. I wanted to see if you wanted to get dinner.”

“Hmmm.” I smiled. “I’m kind of seeing someone,” I lied. While Albie’s attention was nice, an evening with his simpering anxiety wasn’t my idea of a good time. It was a shame because he was my type—one of them.

“Oh. Oh.” His lip quivered—there was a flash of disappointment in his eyes, replaced by kindness. “Well, I hope he treats you right. My late husband was great. I hope you find something like we had.”

My breath caught. I was not expecting that: “late husband.” Suddenly Albie’s character was given plunging depth, an entire tragic history submerged below this tip of his present social anxiety.

In intermittent flashes, I pictured his love story—its demise—and now this scene. He was most likely newly single, putting himself out there for the first time.

“Yeah,” I said. My voice broke slightly; the cocky inflection I added at the gym slipping away. “You know, I’d still grab your number. Maybe we could work out together sometime.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Albie pulled out his cell and tapped it against mine, exchanging contact information.

“Cool.” He stared at his screen, his face shining in the dim glow. “Cool.”

“Nice,” I patted his arm as I walked by. “See you around.”

“Yeah. Yeah. See ya.”

#

Sunday nights were the worst. I'd venture out when possible to drink at the bars in the afternoon. I'd go hard and try to put myself in a browned-out blur so the evening would vanish, and I could wake up to the work week, to mindless tasks that needed my attention.

But there wasn't always an invitation. Sometimes there wasn't a party. Sunday afternoon would drag into a lonely evening. I'd still drink, but it was a morose effort when done alone. After a few whiskies and cigarettes, the haze set in. I'd sit on my balcony and scroll through my phone looking for some low-hanging fruit, some man who'd fawned over me at a bar that I could pull into my depressed web for a lonely evening together.

The Sunday after I'd spoken with Albie, though, the pattern changed. I thought of him, alone like me. But while my apartment was filled with a metallic, sterile cleanliness, his would be haunted. "My late husband." What would it be like to live in that space after someone you loved died? My father had died when I was an adult, but our emotional connections had been frayed to the point of non-existence. He expired, alone in a hospital bed somewhere in Missouri. Mom had called two days after they found her number and asked her to take care of the body.

"He's dead," she said. It was mid-conversation after a check of the weather and brief discussion of our jobs— a perfect illustration of the Midwestern propriety I'd internalized, the burying of emotions with the hope that Puritanical gumption would assure they didn't rise, zombified later.

“Was it cancer?”

“Yeah. I guess he was near Columbia, Missouri. He worked at a Home Depot.”

She had him cremated and put his ashes in a storage shed.

I scrolled through my phone and found Dan’s number. As the dial tone rang, I rubbed my eyes, cleared my throat, and tried to fend off my drunkenness.

He didn’t pick up. When his voice came on introducing his voicemail, I felt a sob rise in my throat.

*Hey, it’s your boy Danny. Leave one for me!*

When the phone beeped, I cut the call. I set my phone down and finished my latest glass of whiskey and stubbed out my cigarette.

Only seconds later, my phone chirped. I picked it up and stared down at Dan’s response:

*Fuck off.*

In that moment, it struck me as horribly sad. Despite the harshness of his text, I knew he’d never block me. Some night he’d be out in a bar, alone, and he’d swipe through his contacts to find my name. It was the gay ouroboros. The constant drive to novelty fighting the gravity of the certain and the loved.

I hesitated only a moment before opening my contacts and seeing his name at the top of the list: Albie.



I sucked the last residue of alcohol from my glass and opened a message.

#

Albie lived in a tiny house, farther west than I would have thought for where our gym was located. He'd insisted on hosting and making dinner.

Annoyance at the request faded when he opened the door and greeted me. The scent of baking chicken and steaming vegetables hit my nose. Albie was dressed too nicely, very endearingly, in a button-up shirt and red tie.

"Hey!" He pulled me in for a hug. He placed a wet kiss on my cheek. "I'm really glad you could make it."

"Yeah. I was happy to head out this way."

Pressed close to his stubbled cheek, I smelled the scent of his cologne. It was older, father-like, smelling dense and musky.

"Come in! Come in!"

The house was quiet. Soft music played in the background, low trembling notes of synthesizers.

"Make yourself at home."

In most cases, I would never travel this far to for sex, but curiosity drove me there. It was the thought of Albie alone in his haunted home. I wanted to see where he lived, how he lived as someone who had once been partnered—ostensibly happy and in love.

The living room was cozy. A grandfather clock sat in the corner. The couches were all a dull pink color, covered in knitted blankets. It was an odd juxtaposition to the general presentation of Albie as a muscled lumberjack figure, this setting of pastels and florals.

I looked at the pictures he had set about the room. His late husband was featured in most. He was a handsome man, slightly older than Albie with wire spectacles and a gray beard. They had traveled extensively—Paris, Rome, London.

“It’s almost ready,” Albie called. “We’ll eat in the kitchen.”

Albie fluttered around the stove, setting burners and checking the oven. I took a seat at the small table in the corner. It was impeccably set, a bottle of white wine chilled in the center.

“Feel free to pour yourself a glass. I’m going to get things plated.”

It was hot in the small room. I’d worn a stylish light jumper over a seductive top, a sleeveless shirt with a deep V-neck that showed off my round pecs. I didn’t know what I expected to do with Albie, but I knew sex was hovering over everything that was transpiring.

“Knowing how you look, I went fully healthy,” he said pulling out the baking tray from the oven. “I assume you don’t eat much mac n’ cheese.” He smiled at me and wiped a stream of sweat from his forehead.

“I’ll occasionally treat myself,” I said.

Although I never did. After I came out, fighting the oppressive mind games of the church, I dedicated my body to getting men. While most things in my life hadn't been as successful, that endeavor had been a triumph. It was one thing I could fully control. I put my hands behind my head and flexed my biceps.

"It smells great."

"I hope it is."

In a few minutes, the food was before us and wine was poured. Albie lifted his glass and tipped it toward mine.

"To new friends," he said. "I'm glad you decided to text."

We cheersed.

"It's honestly nice to meet someone like you," I said. "There aren't many guys I know who'd put this much effort into a date."

"Ah. Well, younger men have less time."

"I suppose."

We exchanged light pleasantries. I told him I was an account executive; Albie shared that he was in sales for a tech organization.

He studied me, his eyes flicking to the line between my pecs, my thick forearms. He'd also assumed sex would be a possibility—his button up shirt was obscenely tight.

Conversation meandered away from formalities to the personal.

“You have a big family?” he asked.

“Me, my mom, and brother. My dad was absent.”

“Ah. Did you have any relationship with him?”

“No. When I was a kid—some memories, but he left when I was eight.”

“That’s hard.” He tapped the stem of his wine glass. “My parents and I were never close. I have two sisters, but we barely see each other.” He cleared his throat.

“Eric, my husband, and I were all each other had. He was from Russia—he immigrated when he was nineteen.”

I set down my fork and studied him. If I was being honest, the question on my lips was the driving reason for me being there.

“What happened to him? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“No, it’s fine.” He crossed his arms and leaned back from the table. “It was a freak accident. He was on a bike and a car went through a red light. The impact killed him immediately.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you.”

I took a sip of wine. The emotional failures of my Midwesternism rose up. All I could think to say was:

“It’s wonderful you had each other. When my father died, there was no one. My mother just paid for his cremation—he’s in a storage shed in Ohio.”

“Hmmm.” Albie nodded. “We all grieve—or don’t grieve—in our own ways.”

“I suppose so.”

We spoke more, the chicken, asparagus, and fruit salad desert vanishing and wine glasses emptying.

When all was done, I shifted back in my chair and put my hands behind my head, my biceps clenched. The wine and food had dimmed my desire for a sexual encounter, but I wanted to give the host a quick, erotic show; he’d paid for it in sustenance and alcohol.

Albie looked at me. It was not what I’d expected—horniness and hunger—but a wan kind of sadness. He’d perhaps understood my body—my conversation and the lack of intent.

“You look incredible,” he said. “Thank you for coming.”

He began to pick up plates and dishes and head to the kitchen. I heard the faucet turn on and porcelain clatter.

I felt badly about it, but Albie had some sort of halo around him that I didn’t want to denigrate. He’d had a life, a good one, full of love and companionship. We’d conversed warmly and idly with little crackle or sexual chemistry.

It could be, I supposed, that two gay men could gather in a home and sit with each other under a cloud of romantic interest and no storm would form.

That could be what a real relationship was like, not the violent, explosive kind I'd always found myself in. The kind that found Dan and I fighting—me texting him at dusk full of whiskey.

"Can I use your bathroom?" I asked.

"Of course." Albie appeared in the doorway to the kitchen. "Up the stairs, first door on the left. There's only one—my husband and my main cause of conflict." He laughed to himself and turned back to the dishes.

I jogged up the steps and stepped into the bathroom. I paused in the doorway and looked down the short hall that led to the back of the house. There weren't many rooms. A guest room, across from the bathroom that was open on my right, and another that was at the end of the hall.

The reason for this date, this evening, had been curiosity, and it made sense to satisfy it all. What was the bedroom of a married gay like? What sort of bland simplicity or stability did it evoke? When Dan and I had been dating, our room was a nest of sheets—in the morning the pungent odor of sex and man clung to the air. I imagined Albie's chamber would be tidy and clean, a light hint of lilac or linen scent floating from a tasteful candle.

I was sure that Albie would not hear my little expedition. The clatter of plates and the sounds from the small speaker he'd had playing would drown it all out.

I ventured down the hall and stood before the closed door to the former marital bed. For a brief moment, I contemplated walking away, respectfully moving on and leaving this sacred privacy to Albie and his late husband. But I was too wanton—the thought of looking into that room as tempting as the heavy feeling of cigarette smoke in my lungs.

The door clicked and I pushed it open. When the whole image was revealed, I staggered back, nearly tripping on the door frame.

All *was* tidy: the bed made, the windows clean, and the floor scrubbed. The anomaly sat in the corner. A body staring back at me.

I recognized the gray beard, the wire spectacles.

It wasn't him of course, but an approximation. The face was a terrifying mask constructed of paint and papier-mâché. It resided deeply in the uncanny valley, a forlorn nearness to the handsome man I'd seen in the photos downstairs. The rest of him was constructed from an old suit and stuffing. Between the creature's legs was an urn.

Perhaps most distressing were the stains that littered the stuffed man's suit. It was clear Albie had made advances on the puppet in a recent past.

I turned behind me to see if Albie was there, if the shuffle of my feet had stirred him.

But all was calm. Below I could hear the dull sound of water and muffled music.

Though I tried, I couldn't pull myself away from the creature. The longer one looked upon it, the more tragic it became. I had to believe that the face was made by an amateur hand, most likely Albie. The paint had run in places—one of the eyes, behind the dead man's glasses, was looking just slightly to the left.

I thought of the dead bird's gaze in the alley.

I imagined my father's remains in a hot storage shed in the middle of Ohio.

I finally was able to leave. I pulled the door shut and moved quickly down the hall. In the bathroom, I relieved myself and then ran my fingers under the chilled water from the tap.

There was some oddness happening to my mind, my understanding of partnership and love. I'd thought there were two ways of it all—the simple and the gluttonous—but it all was multiplying and dividing—fractalizing in my consciousness.

When I'd finished in the bathroom, I went down the stairs. Despite the tectonic shifts in myself, the world was largely as I'd left it—domestic, calm, and bright with the setting June sun.

Albie had not heard my approach, so I used that time, standing in the doorway, to study him. I saw him differently, perhaps more absolutely: his wide back, the salt-and-pepper grayness of his hair, his slow, methodic movements.

In that space between the sexualized creature above us and the glaring light cascading through the window, all seemed wildly trapped yet alive.



I crept toward him and gripped his thick forearms. His breath caught as I pressed my hard member into him.

He turned and tried to speak, but I pressed my lips against his to silence him. Death clung to that house. It clung to me. And so we fought against it in that desperate golden hour, two shades fighting in the gauzy afternoon light for form.