

HIGHLIGHT TO SEE CONTENT WARNINGS:

NICHOLAS:

(as the intro plays) At the edge of Gilt City, drum beats shudder across the lonely spaces between, and all await the arrival of the Night Post.

[STATIC UNDERLIES MILO'S DIALOGUE WHILE HE'S SPEAKING ON THE PHONE.]

MILO:

I haven't heard anything from the police yet... Yeah, I thought he'd be back by now too.

MILO *(interior)*:

My mother keeps calling but nothing's changed. Ashley's been missing for a week now. The official report lists last Thursday morning, but I haven't seen my husband since last Sunday evening... directly before his shift at the Night Post.

MILO:

I mean, I'm sure they are taking it seriously. They have to take it seriously, right? A normal guy just... *disappears*... vanishes... is just gone? They'll have to find him.

MILO *(interior)*:

But even as I say this to my mother through our shoddy landline connection, I know it's not entirely true. Missing persons aren't uncommon in Gilt City, and our police force is truly little more than a gang with an expensive dress code; "payroll pigs," Ashley has called them on more than one occasion...

(gentle sigh) Ashley. I have so few people in my life that I can rely on. And to have someone you trust wholeheartedly just disappear is... well, it's disgustingly unfair. Especially when you've bonded over having nearly nothing.

MILO:

Sorry, what was that? *(pause)* No, Agi's given me the past week off.

MILO *(interior)*:

The fact that my mother even remembers my boss's name is surprising. Have I mentioned it recently? Probably. We've spoken more in the past week than we have in the last several years since I lived at home.

MILO:

Yeah, she said she could handle the bookstore on her own for a week. *(pause)* Hey, her words, not mine! I told her I'd try to come in. It's not like I really want my 71-year-old boss to work alone, but she threatened to change the locks if I came back before they found him.

MILO (*interior*):

Despite our over forty-year age gap, I've grown closer to Agatha than I have to anyone besides my husband. She puts up with absolutely zero bullshit from me *and* the customers, but Agi was the first person I called in a panic after waiting well into Monday evening for Ashley to return home.

MILO:

No, I haven't heard anything from his boss or the other couriers either. Not when he never showed up for his next shift *or* any day between then and now. (*pause*) Mother, I don't know who they are! Ashley never talked about the Post *at all*. No names, no phone numbers, nothing. I mean, you can't blame him for not wanting to talk about the damn job. You know how people treat them. Like they're responsible for all the weird stuff that goes on in this city.

MILO (*interior*):

The Night Post: couriers for the entirety of Gilt City and rural area beyond. Ashley is the first person I ever met who admitted to being a "pigeon." Working from dusk to dawn, anyone unlucky enough to *join* their ranks is designated "suspicious." They're the scapegoats who brave whatever haunts the edges of the city. Monsters, maniacs, murderous entities that lack a physical form. A whole host of shadowy bogeymen exist where the streetlamps stop. Occurrences are a bit rare in Gilt City these days, but they're simply a fact of life for many.

But the rumors surrounding the pigeons, the people with the most contact with the... paranormal, I guess... range from harmless to viciously cruel, playground banter that can, and does, quickly escalate to physical assault... or worse. They deliver directly to those who are either too poor to live in the city or simply choose not to. Ashley has been roughed up from time to time either before or after a shift, but I've never heard him complain. He always leaves, does his job, and comes back home without much fanfare.

Not that Ashley or any of the others had a choice. You don't apply to a job like that; not that it wouldn't be a last resort for just about anyone anyway. No, you're simply chosen. Not much to it, from what Ashley's said on one of the few occasions he's opened up about it. My husband has been as diligent as can be expected for such a job like that as long as I've known him--nearly ten years now. We know virtually everything about each other, but his time at the Post is entirely alien to me--an unknown in our fairly steady lives.

MILO:

Yes, I hope he's okay too. (*pause*) Um, look, I've had a *really* bad headache all day. Can I call you back tomorrow?

MILO (*interior*):

I'm more than happy to cut the conversation short. I've never been too close to my parents. We never had a falling out; we just aren't close. I was thoroughly a middle child, having two older sisters and a pair of younger brothers. Well, I still am, I guess. My parents still live in our family

home in the middle districts across the city; my siblings never moved out of Gilt City, either. Very few people do, actually. We all speak occasionally, exchange the appropriate holiday cards, but I can't say much bonds us beyond blood.

MILO:

Alright, yeah, I love you, too.

MILO (*interior*):

Ashley and I try to keep our expenses to a minimum and a landline is pretty cheap. Besides, cellular service is expensive and fairly unreliable even in the city. Doubt it's even available outside of town at all, honestly. Having half hour conversations through solid static is draining and I don't have much more energy to give at this point.

I don't remember making my way back through the kitchen and into our small living room, but here I am, sitting sullenly in the olive green armchair--obviously second-or-third hand--staring out our singular window into the quiet street beyond. Ashley's window planter is sitting here on the broad sill.

[WHEN MILO SPEAKS ALOUD, SOUNDS OF ACTIVITY CAN BE HEARD FROM THE STREET.]

MILO:

Wait, it's drying up already? (*annoyed sigh*) Come on!

MILO (*interior*):

What had been a long, plastic trough filled with fragrant greenery is already taking on a faint yellow hue, tips of herb leaves beginning to brown and curl. My black thumb is nearly balanced by Ashley's knack for keeping anything alive. A few years back he fostered an entire litter of infant racoons after finding the mother--stiff and obviously dead--in the small alleyway between our building and our neighbors. I came out of the ordeal with plenty of scratches and one finger with a nasty infection.

MILO:

Oh, jeez, he's gonna be so mad when he realizes I started letting everything die because I was too busy crying over him.

MILO (*interior*):

Oh god, the crying. I can't remember a single time in my whole life I've bawled this much. I've rubbed my eyes raw a million times over--face all red and splotchy like a sad rash. I would have never described myself as an overly emotional person but I've spent the last week sustaining myself on nothing but tangy tears and blood from having anxiously gnawed the inside of my cheeks to the tender flesh underneath.

MILO:

I am... (*exhausted sigh*) pathetic. C'mon Milo, get yourself together. Water the plants then you can have another long nap.

MILO (*interior*):

I'm nearly back to the kitchen when I hear...

[THREE LOUD, FORCEFUL KNOCKS. LOW, SUSPENSEFUL SYNTH TONE FADES IN.]

MILO:

What the hell... one sec!

MILO (*interior*):

My first thought immediately goes to the police. Have they found him? *Is* it him? I'm standing dumbly in the middle of the room, not moving. I should have seen whoever it was coming up the stoop; the wide window is just to the right of the front door.

Creeping over to the window--nearly tripping over a stack of books I've been meaning to donate--I wait for a moment behind the half-drawn curtain. The knock isn't followed by a voice... and I can't hear anything, either. Not even the rattle of the busses or trolleys that crisscross most of the city at all times of the day.

I lean towards the window a bit more, the cool fabric of the semi-sheer curtains tickling my ear, and again... nothing. The kids that are always playing in the streets--and had been a few minutes ago--are silent. And as I slowly brush the curtain to one side I can see that it's because they're not outside anymore.

Actually, no one is.

[LOW, SUSPENSEFUL SYNTH TONE FADES OUT]

The two women from neighboring flats diagonal from mine aren't out on the sidewalk chatting like they were, either. Something else feels... not right. I turn to look at the clock across the room: 5:30 p.m. I look back and it hits me: it's nearly dark out where the sun had only begun to cast late-afternoon shadows last I'd looked. Way too dark for mid-afternoon on a late-summer day.

MILO:

What the hell is going on...

MILO (*interior*):

And as I begin to back away from the window...

[THE THREE KNOCKS COME AGAIN, EVEN MORE FORCEFUL. THE LOW SYNTH TONE RISES.]

I'm not brave enough to sneak another look from the window, so I just call out--

MILO:

Who is it?

MILO (*interior*):

The silence feels nearly tangible now as I stand in the middle of my living room, straining to catch a whispered answer, the scuff of a boot on the stoop, anything. Who could be pulling this kind of stunt? My confusion changes to anger quickly. The whole situation is messed up and I've nearly had all I can handle.

Across the room, leaning in a corner, is a baseball bat--Ashley's from when he plays in a loosely organized neighborhood league. Grabbing it in a white knuckled grip, I step lightly over to the front door.

[SYNTH TONE FADES OUT]

I'm far from athletic or domineering but hauling crates of books around all day has given me more than enough muscle to power one good, swift swing.

Bat at the ready, I reach for the doorknob. My hands are slick and I'm gripping the knob with the same vice-like hold as on the bat. But I need to wait for the next knock; catch whoever it is in the act. Maybe get some answers instead of just another worry.

I'm waiting, but it's beginning to feel like the thudding knocks won't come again. Actually, the only thudding I hear is the blood rushing in my ears as my heart seems to beat in my throat.

MILO:

C'moooon...

[TWO LOUD, FORCEFUL KNOCKS]

MILO (*interior*):

I swing the door open as the second knock comes, raising the bat behind me...

MILO:

What the...

[STREET NOISE FADES IN: CARS, PEOPLE TALKING, SOMEONE MOWING THEIR LAWN.]

MILO (*interior*):

The stoop is empty. I rush out onto the sidewalk--shoeless with the bat still at the ready--and into the dimming afternoon sunlight.

The older neighbors across the street are once again at their usual positions on their respective stoops but they'd stop talking to stare at me. A bus rumbles by, thick exhaust hanging in the hot, humid air.

MILO:

But it was just nearly pitch dark outside...

MILO (*interior*):

The older pair each shuffle back inside as I drop the bat, still half dazzled by the setting sun. A group of teens cycle by, being sure to move to the opposite side of the street. But there's no sign of anyone out of place. I quickly check the alleyway but no one could have navigated the trash cans and odd pieces of furniture without making a bit of noise.

I make my way back up the stairs to my wide-open door--now more drained than confused or upset--and I move to step inside before I see a large manila envelope lying on the warm, brick steps. Snatching it up quickly, I take one last look up and down the street before retreating back inside.

[STREET NOISE FADES OUT]

I double check the lock and fall exhaustedly into the old armchair.

MILO:

I am about to lose it. Why is everything so... *wrong*? And no one could have got out of sight that quickly. I threw that door open so fast! I should have asked the pair across the street who they saw... if anyone, I guess. And who left this envelope?

MILO (*interior*):

I no longer feel comfortable with the window uncurtained, even with the sun shining again. Looking out onto the normalcy that had once again settled on our street, I move to pull the curtains closed when I see it: Ashley's planter--earlier a mix of green and browning herbs -- is now entirely shriveled up. The leaves are charred black, curled in on themselves; the stems are the same, shriveled all the way down to the dirt they're anchored in. The soil is still glistening in the dimming sunlight where I'd watered it not a half hour before, but everything is now thoroughly dead.

Fighting a sudden and overpowering urge to throw up the meager meal I'd eaten earlier, I quickly slide the wide window open, shove the plastic planter through the unscreened hole, and slam it shut, making sure to latch it closed before finally drawing the curtains.

[AS MILO DESCRIBES IT, WE HEAR THE WINDOW OPENING, A BUSH RUSTLING AS THE PLANTER FALLS INTO IT, AND THE WINDOW LOUDLY SHUTTING AGAIN.]

I sit and stare at the envelope perched on the thrifted coffee table from the armchair I had collapsed into. Bold handwriting in rust-red ink read, "To Mr. Milo Cylix-Wilder."

It takes me a moment to register that I've snatched up the envelope and torn the seal instead of releasing the clasp.

[IN THE BACKGROUND, PAPER RUSTLES AND IS RIPPED OPEN.]

Inside are roughly ten typed pages on yellowing paper. The top page is a crisp white--obviously recently typed--and read:

[HIGH, EERIE NOISE FADES IN]

MILO:

(reading) Dear Mr. Milo Cylix-Wilder:

I hope this letter finds you in good health. As the Postmaster of Station No. 103, it is my duty and privilege to extend to you employment with the Night Post as a Primary Courier. This position is one of prestige within Gilt City. Our family, friends, and fellow citizens rely on the dedication exhibited by all of us at the Post. Contributing to the growing success that is Gilt City is an important role--one which your fellow Couriers and I will be more than happy to prepare you for to the best of our ability.

As is customary, accepting and fulfilling the duties of a Primary Courier--as outlined in the proceeding documents--is a non-negotiable tenet of our responsibility as citizens of Gilt City. Failure to accept and comply with said duties is both an offense punishable under Code GCP 1161 and an unforgivable breach of trust against your fellow Couriers.

Thank you for your understanding. We all look forward to meeting you soon.

Yours sincerely, Nicholas Best.

[HIGH, EERIE NOISE FADES OUT]

MILO *(interior)*:

Attached to the letter is a small note, though this was written in scribbled black ink:

MILO:

(reading) I'm sorry to hear that Ashley is still missing. Sorry for the shrewd paperwork; bureaucracy dictates everyone gets sent the same thing. Will meet soon. - N. Best.

MILO *(interior)*:

I sit stunned for a minute, rereading the letter one more time to make sure I'm not misunderstanding. Lifting up the attached note I see a date and time stamped--the next evening at dusk... less than twenty-four hours from now.

MILO:

So I'm a... replacement? My husband disappears and I get a summons for a job nobody wants?!

[LOUD YELL. SOUND OF PAPERS BEING THROWN. QUIET, SAD TUNE FADES IN.]

MILO (*interior*):

Curling up into the armchair, making myself as small as possible, I hold my head in my hands and sit in silence until the last rays of the sun that made their way through the cracks in the curtains dim, then fade entirely. It's well over an hour before I force myself to get up and collect the scattered papers. One person has come to mind.

[QUIET, SAD TUNE FADES OUT]

If I'm going to make the call, I'm as composed as I probably will be for a while.

MILO:

(*loud sigh*) Oh, Agi... I need to let her know I'm not coming back for a while.

MILO (*interior*):

I return to the phone that hangs in the kitchen on the wall opposite the humming fridge. I know the shop's number better than my own at this point. Not surprising considering I'm the one who handwrites all of Agi's business cards. She's teased me more than once about how neatly I write and I'm convinced it's because she's slightly embarrassed about how bad hers is. It'd be a waste of time to try her home line first. Even on days the shop is closed she wanders in, rearranging displays or shuffling boxes that are nearly as large as she is.

[PHONE DIALING AND RINGING. PHONE STATIC FADES IN EACH TIME MILO SPEAKS ALOUD.]

The receiver picks up and I can hear Agi struggling with the cord. I keep the phone in the front neatly tucked near the till, so she has to be wrangling the phone on her disheveled desk. She mutters something--surely about the time, the shop being closed, maybe a swear or two--before greeting me with a curt, raspy, "hello?"

MILO:

Sorry I had to bother you, Agi. It's Milo.

MILO (*interior*):

Her tone softens a bit when she realizes, and immediately starts asking about Ashley in a voice that gives away she is expecting the worst.

MILO:

No, no, they haven't found anything yet. I searched a few places myself, but nothing turned up. Anyways, sorry I had to bother you this late on a Sunday.

MILO (*interior*):

Agi brushes it off and admits having spent most of the day putting away donations and new merchandise. I'm usually around to handle the heavy lifting and *anything* involving a ladder. I started hiding the damn thing after the last of several short falls. Honestly, she's lucky her body is as tough as her demeanor because she should have had a broken neck or back several times over by now.

An unusual silence settles over both of us. I try to find a way to reassure her I'm doing okay and that it'll be over soon, but instead just let the silence sit a bit longer. Agi obviously cares, though I doubt there's much comfort in just words for either of us at this point. Figures that we both practically live in a bookshop and still can't find the right words. And then I catch something in the background on her end--a familiar tune.

[NOW, WHEN MILO TALKS, WE CAN HEAR RAPID ROCK MUSIC IN THE BACKGROUND.]

MILO:

Agatha, that wouldn't be my "Riot Queens" album playing back there, would it?

MILO (*interior*):

More than once she'd chided me for my taste in music, especially bands with "crude names" or, most damning, "questionable lyrical choices." A lot of my free time is spent in dingy warehouses or bars where the only entrance is hidden down a shabby alleyway.

Large portions of Gilt City are like this though. The business and downtown districts--centrally located, of course--are well-maintained and tidy with the newest busses, buildings, and technology. The rest of our quickly spreading city is... much less of all these things. Less technological, less shiny, less fresh, but just as full of life, if not more so. Musicians I follow most closely that energy and frustration we feel and make some pretty amazing stuff. That said, I guess I can't say Agi is wrong really. Their music is abrasive and... definitely bold.

She stammers a bit at my (accurate) accusation before settling on "wanting to fill the silence." I Smile. I've worked for Agi since I was 21; seven years to foster the best friendship I've ever had.

MILO:

Well, don't worry. I won't tell anyone you're dabbling in queer punk! (*chuckle*) Actually... it, um, may be a bit before I can come by and grab my things.

MILO (*interior*):

I hear her begin to question me before simply asking, “The Night Post?”

MILO:

Yeah, how did you know?

MILO (*interior*):

Agi’s voice lowers to barely more than a whisper. I instinctively look around my empty kitchen, but of course I’m the only one home. The itching urge to double check the locks and close all the windows against the quickening twilight stays, though. Despite her whispering, my closest friend and mentor’s words are clear: “don’t trust them.” A warning tinged with worry.

MILO:

Woah, wait. Don’t trust who? The Post? Should I just... not go?

MILO (*interior*):

The old CD player blares out a few frenzied drum beats as the album closes out.

[RAPID ROCK MUSIC FADES OUT]

Her next words are offered as tenderly and with as much a maternal tone I’ve ever heard her use: “If they’re calling you to replace him, someone believes that Ashley won’t be found. Be careful, Milo. I’ve lived through much of Gilt City’s history and there are few entities as dangerous and methodical as the Post. When you get time, please come see me, okay? I might be able to offer some help.”

If Agi had more to say, it’s lost when our connection cuts out. I try to dial the shop again, but it rings without an answer. A few more tries... and nothing.

I can’t remember a time I’ve felt so isolated, barring the past few days spent in near silence. The shop is only a twenty minute bike ride away, but roaming around after dark--and alone--is not... ideal. Other people pose an obvious threat. The less-human entities, if a bit rare in the city nowadays, are another issue altogether.

MILO:

Guess I’ll have to get used to that if I’m going to be a courier.

MILO (*interior*):

After an hour or so of waiting for Agi to call back, I decide to find my way upstairs, resolving to try her line again in the morning.

[THE STAIRS CREAK AS MILO CLIMBS TO THE SECOND FLOOR.]

I fall into our tousled sheets, wrapping myself in the thin comforter against the quickly cooling air. As I try to drift off to sleep I can't help thinking about Agi's... warning? Ashley never seemed to have an issue with anyone he worked with. Well... at least from what he would tell me.

Emotional and physical exhaustion are mingling now, and I can feel myself fading fast. Lying here, eyes shut against the stark blackness of the room, I can smell something familiar against the faint dampness of the city: it's the only cologne Ashley has ever worn in the time I've known him. Sweet neroli, musk, and the distinct, lingering tang of vetiver, moist and earthy... smelling of both smoke and soil.

[LOUD, AMBIENT OFFICE SOUNDS FADE IN: PEOPLE TALKING, PHONES RINGING, A COPIER SPITTING OUT PAPERS.]

I've been rushed quickly through the station doors, past the sorting area, and through an office or two until I'm face-to-face with the other couriers. Well, two of them, at least.

I've been told that the others have already left for their routes. As we stand in a bit of silence, I study the pair: two women, about my age, studying me for a moment before introducing themselves as Clementine and Val.

MILO:
Hey... I'm Milo.

MILO (*interior*):
It's going to be a long night.

NICHOLAS:
(*as the outro plays*) Thank you for joining us on tonight's route. You can reach the couriers of Station 103 at nightpostpod@gmail.com or on Twitter [@nightpostpod](https://twitter.com/nightpostpod). If you're satisfied with your postal service, please rate and review us. Send a letter to your local congressperson, and tell them about *The Night Post*.