

Living Alone

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The nip in the air doesn't bother me too much. My hair whipped furiously around my head, slashing thick slits of black across my line of vision. Not feeling my fingers is a sensation I am beginning to get used to. Here is my new place. Where I rise to pitch nothingness every morning, where the silence still rings in my ears three months in. Here is where I lift my limbs to and from the bath, slather them in oil and wince when the wounds across my hips and stomach burn. Here is where I've picked up a dirty habit of scratching at my skin as I sleep. Here are the gloves I wear to protect me from myself.

This small bed is where I lay my bones to rest as the day furiously chases towards night. I'm never able to find enough light in a day. The unsettling ring of a TV droning on in the other room and an oven hissing as it roasts my meal keep me alert and erect. There's not much slouching that goes on in this place.

This place has everything I never knew I needed. An ill-sized boiler to keep me on my toes; there's no dillydallying as I get ready in the morning. Floors to remind me of my delicate feet. A glass windowpane tells me to stop feeling sorry for myself. The vacant, hard stares of the people on the train: who knew I would settle into the feeling of always sitting on the edge of my seat?

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Living a life alone was something I both avoided and was grotesquely drawn to. The humble life of solitude was certainly grounding the first night I couldn't get the heating on. Every meal that I ate with my invisible companion was another excuse to practice my small-talk manner. I want to pepper my vernacular with as many nuances as possible. The cat on the ledge beyond my kitchen window remains a silhouette.

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These are the people I left behind.

There is my mother with her soft face and tired eyes. Her hands betray her many years of hard work; they are soft and plush and a bundle in my own spidery digits. My mother said 'Go' when I told her I was leaving. She said 'Go' when my heart was breaking, 'Go' when my last job folded. My mother knew the only way I could begin was to start with breaking apart.

I fought with my father on the days leading to my departure. The night before I left we were not speaking. My father's hot temper mirrors mine. His brutal words tried failingly to mask his disappointment. His

stubbornness is why I haven't heard his voice in months. His frugality diluted into me is why I don't have a phone to ring alarmingly. I am my father's daughter.

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How quiet does a room need to be until the heart takes over completely? The insistent thudding of a vital organ keeps a steady beat drowning out every whim and every fancy. My littlest love can no longer sit still. All the big ones have taken me whole.

The extensive capacity of a house with just you and me is overwhelming but I feed off of my shortness of breath. Each one: four fingers hanging onto a cliff's edge. Your arms are velvet curtains that become shadows and then mould and then dust.

How many arms need to enfold me before I come out a swan?

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Living Alone

I.

The silence is a fog that follows me from one room to another. It stains my arms; crystal, wet. There is one of everything. Two - of the ones revealing a doubled past. Pillowcases, wine flutes, cutlery in pairs. Everything else lives a strong existence in solo. The barrenness of a stark bed with a single pillow is liberating and terrifying. I leave lights on like breadcrumbs in every room just in case. It is important to be able to trace one's steps when living alone. The faint outline of footprints in the carpet reminds me I need to vacuum.

II.

Meal time is savoured but the preparation is cumbersome. The aesthetic

high of a bowl of ripe fruits and thriving vegetables soon fades after a week or so. Procuring the freshest produce and their benefits has become a dragging routine. The ideal ratio of preparation to meal time is 20:80. I err towards bread, oiled or buttered, cherry tomatoes in a mint and black pepper vinaigrette and a thin slice of ham, washed down with a glass of water. Most things are parred down when you start living alone. Food is both an indulgence and a chore.

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‘Let’s put this right here,’ you said as you placed a vase upon the dresser.

I looked for your love in all the details. A stack of similarly hued book spines. A frame on the wall. A glass of water on my bedside table. Your sorry smile turned from sheepish to distant. I closed my eyes when you yelled at me and pretended we were cheering for the same team.

‘How many times?’ I asked over and over. But the answer was infinite. As the grot clogged up the spaces between the tiles, I imagined us slowly being eaten away till the rotting, wormy core of you and me.

Packing a bag is easy. It’s finding a place for everything that’s hard.

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Places can become home to me so quickly. I never forget but I can put away. The filing cabinets in the living room are ugly but new. I like the raw coldness of their surfaces. When we accidentally touch it is like a quick shock, a small slap on the wrist, saying: “do you really need it?” Normally I do but I won’t go back.

I put them all away for safekeeping. Here is my mother’s smooth, warm face; her tired eyes and thinning brows. Here is my father’s stern look of disapproval; his hot temper folded in as well. The comfort of nameless familiar faces, a billowing tune from the flute down the street, all this gray in the harsh sunlight: filed away for an unbearable night.

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How to love continuously for 9 years

Remember when you broke your arm and you had to be put to sleep so they could burrow metal into your flesh. Remember the whisper of your voice and how scared you were to sign 'ok' to the possible risks involved. Remember how I'd planned all night to break up with you until your voice came on the line the next morning. Remember how the morphine and stories about your Filipino nurse covered up my feelings of contempt. Remember how we went on another year.

Remember the cocktail of grogginess and excitement, arriving in a new country for the first time. Remember waiting an hour for you to arrive at the airport. Remember the cold steel airport chairs, the weight of worry on my brain, the possibility that you were never going to come. Remember picking berries for the first time in the English countryside. Remember the novelty of the self-checkout counter. Remember cooking for two and the sunlight warming up my feet as I stood in your tiled kitchen. Remember taking so many walks.

Try not to remember.

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Sleeping Alone

I. There is so much space allowing for stretching of the limbs to full capacity. Extend from the hips to the kneecaps facing upwards, the curve of the foot, pointed toes. Pop both elbows forward, let your flimsy wrists fall this way and that, concentrate on the yearning in your fingers. The head lolls. The body is weighted into the mattress forming a mold from repeated nights of the same position. A cool spot to rest your flushed face. Or perhaps a corner to dry your eyes.

II. Forget what it means to sleep soundly as every sound of the dark

night is magnified in your solitary slumber. Is that a raindrop or a shower? A car engine or thunder? The rustle outside your window stirs your dream. Every fold in your blanket feels like a gorge. Dream lucid. Sleepwalk. Talk to the ghost on your ceiling. No one to trace the curve of you. No one to wrap in your spindly legs. Naps in the daytime are heavy and sweaty but bearable. Night is the hardest time to sleep alone.

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This is mine. The tumbling pile of clothes on the table, the hum of the bulb above my head, the grit between the kitchen tiles. I keep tally of how many nights I sleep dreamless. When I start to lose count I begin all over again. The first night begins with something cool against my skin and a smattering of people and faces remembered.