

THE FORTHCOMING ME

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

The letter looked so average; fresh from a stock photograph. The text inside was simple:

Who are you?

I thought of all the preposterous things I could scribble down and throw into the universe: *A queen of Morningside, an astronaut, a successful, high-flying writer.*

I settled for the more boring truth.

I outlined my life until it fit on the back of an A4 piece of paper. It wasn't difficult; it was nicely contained with a 9-5 job, one husband, no children. A bus pass, a rented house, a broken microwave. I folded the letter into a paper bird and set it flying out the window.

Days later, as I dragged myself and supermarket bags of milk, eggs and bread onto my doorstep I spotted an origami crane nesting in the tree at the bottom of my garden. I laid my messages down, pulled the bird down and locked myself in the bathroom to read it.

Your life is mine. The letter said. *Just like a shadow.*

I found a pen and scribbled harshly: *But who are you?* and scrunched the letter into a tight ball and kicked it down the lane. Of course, after several days, it rolled back to me in its own time.

I don't know. It said. *I've forgotten.*

With that, I'd had enough mystery. I hid it under the knives and forks in the cutlery drawer, pressed against the order of service with the faded photograph of my grandmother. I tried to forget about it.

The next day, as I sat on the rattling bus home from work, I repeated the steps of my evening ahead. *Get in, use the loo, change clothes, turn on the stove, make dinner, do dishes, pack a bag, lay out clothes.* To me it was a song; a repetitive beat a child could dance to on a chalked street corner. I was always so afraid of forgetting.

The knowledge I would beat my husband home and surprise him with dinner warmed me against the cold window. *Get in, use the loo.* Three stops away. *Change clothes, turn on the stove.* I got off the bus and practically raced down the street. *Make dinner, do dishes. Pack bag-*

I turned out my pockets on my coat. I laid my bag on the ground and started unzipping frantically. I took everything out of my bag. I put everything in my bag. I did it again. It was no use. I'd forgotten my keys.

Get in, use loo, change clothes, turn on the stove.

I ran to the park and sat on a bench. It felt like a failure to be found waiting on the doorstep. Proper people don't forget their keys. I huddled myself deeper into my coat as the cold seeped into my legs and the wind chilled my back through the slats.

Make dinner, do dishes, pack a bag.

I put my head in my hands and repeated the steps to myself.

Lay out clothes. Lay out clothes. Lay out clothes.

I eventually circled back. The light in the kitchen was on and I could make out the shape of my husband chopping vegetables through the window.

'Hello!' His voice rang out as I opened the door. He soon appeared in front of me; I could smell pasta cooking.

'How was your day?' He asked.

I forced myself to smile. 'Grand,' I answered. 'Just grand.'

That night I dreamt of my grandmother. I hadn't thought about her in so long that every scene was layered with guilt. She sat in front of a dressing table with a huge mirror. Seeing my reflection, she turned to face me. Only half of her face was painted, exactly down the middle.

'So nice of you to finally join me,' she said.

'I can't stay long.' I protested.

She pulled out a lined box in sky blue.

I balked. 'I don't want it.'

I woke up feeling queasy. The feeling increased when I realised the only photograph of her was nestled in the cutlery drawer beside the scrunched up letter. It felt wrong that the only likeness of her in my home was one so linked to her death, it felt even more wrong that I'd pushed her up against something that had given me nothing but torment.

I got out of bed and found the angriest-looking red pen in the house. *Why have you forgotten? How could you?*

I tore the letter up and I threw it out the window like pieces of confetti. I watched my letter snow the dirty street and eventually fly away.

I remembered the last time I saw her. She was beginning to forget her husband and had long lost the ability to place who I was.

Soon, my grandmother's house was wallpapered with post-its notes. They were friendly yellow reminders of where the bowls and cups were kept, how to get a glass of water from the stiff kitchen tap. Any time I tried to settle into the idea her house could be normal, my hand would brush past a note about where to find her underwear or how to shower and I'd feel like an intruder. One night, when I was staying over I heard a thump coming from the bedroom. My grandmother had forgotten who my grandfather was and hit him with the bedside lamp. As droplets of his blood hit the floor she told me her parents couldn't catch her with a boy. I found my husband at the kitchen table. Spread around him were the letters I'd poorly hidden with the photograph.

‘What are these? Why are all these letters in your handwriting?’ He said, and I sat down to explain.

I don’t know how these letters work, but somewhere, in a place I cannot touch, a woman is relearning her life. She teaches herself, again, how to use a clock, how to use an oven, what bus to get to the shops. Eventually she will have to relearn her husband's chapped palms. Her own body. Her own life.

I can't stop that woman because she is me. A future me. I see glimpses of her in my own forgetfulness. She chases me in the reflections on shop windows, or closing train doors. It is painful to consider forgetting a twisted birth-right of women in my family tree, but that does not lessen it.

I sit down at my desk and I write another letter.

Catherine Wilson is a spoken word poet and writer originally from the Highlands, now based in Edinburgh. Her work has been published by Extra Teeth magazine, Gutter magazine, The Scotsman and The Scottish Book Trust.