

Once The Hands Are Empty.

I often think about the last time you do something without knowing it's the last time. The last time you sit across from someone and don't really look at them because there will be a next time. The last time you hear their voice. You're half listening because there will always be more of it. I think about how full I was then. Without even knowing I was full. Because you only ever understand what you were holding once your hands are empty.

I had a mug. I had warmth moving up through my fingers into my chest and I thought, without thinking, this is enough. Right now, this is enough.

I knew— I thought I knew, I had it all figured out. I didn't hold it tighter. I didn't savour the moment.

I didn't know you could be this empty.

My hands trace the lettering on the mug of hot chocolate. I made this one for *myself*. After seven exhaustingly long hours waiting tables and faking smiles, you take all the victories you can get.

Holding the smooth, shiny ceramic is like running a spoon through a decadent chocolate mousse, the coarse fuzzy lettering swirls around it like braids. And after a while of sipping my mug of quiet triumph, I feel the heat seep into my fingers. Blooming slowly through my whole body. It's oddly comforting.

I stand at the sink rinsing the mug. The water runs over my hands, tracing the grooves and patterns. I barely notice they're shaking. I tell myself that it's cold. The shop is always cold this time of year. We should really get the heating looked at.

The mug has an engraving on it: *I promise to love you forever, to love your children, to watch you fail, grow, and love. I'll love Infinitely.*

She made this one years ago. I don't remember when specifically, but the letters are uneven, the glaze pooled thicker in some places, and there is a baked thumbprint into the clay where she held it. I remember I used to put my thumb there when I drank from it. It was like holding her hand. I stash it back into my bag. Looking back out to the world from the window.

It all just feels so safe from here, I mean from first glance, the way the leaves drift from the trees. The way the sun draws closer to sleep, and the way the myna birds feast on the leftovers of blueberry muffin I should have already cleaned up. Sometimes, on the good days, I forget the world is bigger than this window.

Shit! It's six o'clock. I forgot the brioche for tonight. I pull out my phone, click on my messages app, and tap "Mama Bear XOXO" all in quick succession.

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[Mummm??]

The reply comes almost instantly

[Yea sweet pea...]

I hold my breath

[I forgot the brioche for burgers

4 girls night, an im running really late

....im so so sorry]

There is a pause

Then—

***[Oh, Hunny that's fine im sure we have some
sorta bread somewhere,***

If not there's pasta

just get home safe k!]

[Oh and

I love you infinity]

Another message

[you know that right?]

I slip my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, grab my jacket: red, Mama's favourite. I bound out of the room leaving my peace, quiet, and my warm mug of triumph on the marble counter. And with it I enter the hustle and bustle of the city centre.

I drift with the crowd, making up stories about where everyone needs to be. Out of habit, I suppose. Mum always does it. She says that people become less frightening when you imagine them going home to someone.

The one with the briefcase, he has a 3-year-old at home with a babysitter, he's been worrying about her all day, the babysitter I mean. And the one with the lilac dress, she is running late for a date, she would have spent forty minutes on her hair. Mum would say she looks lovely anyway.

The crowd sweeps me down into the mouth of the station. I find a window seat on the train, and press my forehead against the cool glass. The city peels away in layers first the buildings, grey and dull, that city lifelessness that spreads through every town like a disease, though to my relief the gaps between them grow wider, softer with specks of maroon and mustard autumn leaves.

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Town Hall

A man in a yellow hard hat gets off. Nobody gets on.

I watch the platform slide away and make up a life for him too. He's going home into a hot shower and leftover spag bol.

Malvern

A mother with a pram gets on, and her kid is maybe three, the kid is asking something that the mother isn't answering because she is too bloody tired to answer. I have to look out the window very quickly.

People pour in and out of the carriage in multitudes. It suddenly becomes hard to steer my mind to anything. But the feeling of hot breath on my neck, or the fact that my knees are touching the person in front of me, or the gaunt woman at the back of the carriage screaming profanities, shaking, and twitching. My stomach knots.

The carriage empties. Pain rushes in to fill the space. My Mum is forever asking me to text her when I'm nearly home. *"Remember to text me when you're nearly home, try today, baby just try"* she'd say hot choccy in one hand, pen in the other, looming over her morning crossword. She means it with love and that somehow makes it worse, the way love lands as an accusation even without meaning to.

Then my father, I don't know if he has a garden, or a dog, or a chair by the window, where he sits and watches the dark come in. I don't know his street. I don't know if I cross his mind, the way he crosses mine: Like a door blowing open in a house you thought was sealed.

My breath presses against the cold glass fogging the window up.
I try to wipe it away with my sleeve.
It fogs again.

I feel it beneath my fingers, wool, red. And I think of her hands in the shop holding it up. "What do you think? It suits you."

I think of her texts and her *I love you infinity*. And her voice that never once made me feel like a burden even when I am one.

Something in my chest that has been wound very tight for a very long time just lets go.

Girls night, burgers, her, I put on my headphones and I close my eyes.

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Berwick

I get off the platform and make my way to the bus depot. I always get on the 47.
The same driver every time, grumpy old fart. I tap my card and take the long seat at the back, placing my bag on my lap. I pull out my phone and open Mum's contact.
The thread is long. Sometimes I scroll. Not on purpose. I guess it just happens.
The ordinary ones are the worst. *There's pasta. Let me know when you get home.* The ones that were just a Wednesday.

I type:
[on the bus soon home in 40]
I press send.
MESSAGE NOT SENT
I type:
[Don't start without me!!]
MESSAGE NOT SENT

The signal here has always been terrible.
I'll try from the house.

I get off and prepare to walk up that bloody hill. My breath comes out in clouds and the path is glossy and sleek—it had just been raining.

I skip in zigzags the way I used to when I was little. It makes me think of Mum teaching me how to ride a bike. I fell backwards and took a tumble down the hill, had a giant gash on my knee, scarlet streaks were pouring out of. Mum jokes about how it was as if we were in the *Avengers*, how my knee was being “dramatic.” She took me to get ice cream for dinner after that.

I reach the peak. My chest contorts. I feel my heartbeat thumping away, I notice how uncomfortable my socks feel against my skin, how the wind brushes my hair into my face. There is nothing up here. Just the hill, the sky and me. I press call.

It rings.

I hang up.

The hill goes down as well as up. Past the depot, out past where the streetlights stop, where it's just the bypass and the sound of cars going somewhere— anywhere that isn't here.

I press call.

It rings twice and her voice comes through the phone exactly the way it always has, and I just—
Stand here.

Once The Hands Are Empty.

I hang up.

I call again. I don't know how many times. The stars keep their distance.

At some point my legs give out and I'm on the ground.

The wet seeps into my trousers but I don't move. Instead I take the mug out. There is a chip on the handle that wasn't there this morning. I run my thumb over it. I press down, the edge is sharp and curved, all I have to think about is how it feels. I press until that's all there is.

A car passes.

Eventually my breath comes back in pieces. Somewhere below the cars keep moving. I don't skip anymore.

After trekking up the hill I finally see our house. Mrs. K's light is on. She is standing in the window gazing at me the same way she did this morning. She lifts her hand when she sees me, not a wave exactly, something far gentler. I lift mine back. I should knock sometime. She doesn't look away until I'm at the door.

The key sticks. This is the third time this week. Left, then straight, then push. I know this door better than most people. I nearly slip on one of the four new letters scattered across the mat.

I recognise Auntie Brie's handwriting, the looping that belongs to her generation. I pick them up and take them to the kitchen nook. There is a drawer that doesn't close properly anymore. I put them in with the others. Really, I should reply. They were kind to write. I keep on promising myself I'll do it on the weekend.

The mail keeps coming. But there's a list of people you're supposed to call. I wonder if anyone crossed the street to tell him. Or if you lose the right to know the house burned down the minute you walk out of it.

I set my bag carefully on the counter, pull out the chipped mug and fill the kettle.

I take down the two mugs from the cupboard. I look at them, and put one back. I put the chipped mug in the middle of the table. So I don't have to be alone.

I pull out my phone. Better signal here.

[Home safe]

MESSAGE NOT SENT

I try again

MESSAGE NOT SENT

I put the phone down. I pick it up.

It rings, I close my eyes and wait.

"The number you have dialed is no longer in service"

Once The Hands Are Empty.

I turn the volume up just in case.

I used to fill the quiet with music or TV or anything. Now I listen. Like I'm waiting for something. I look at the chair across from me. The one with the cushion, the floral one—magenta and baby blue, the one that's faded on one side from the sun. She always sat there. A dog-eared crossword book is still on the side table. Open to Thursday. She never finished Thursday.

I check my phone.

MESSAGE NOT SENT

Eleven messages now. All unsent. All sitting in the thread like ghosts. I scroll up. Past today. Past yesterday. Past last week. February 3rd.
Love you Infinity. You know that right?

I want to ask her why.
Not calmly. Not the way you ask a question you expect an answer to. The other way, the way the question just lives in you. Sitting across from you at the table in the chair she sat in.

I want her voice, her actual voice not the automated one.
Her.

Why February?

Why not—
why not tell me. Why did I find out the way I found out?
Standing on a hill in the dark, pressing three little numbers like that would fucking change something, anything.
Why did you tell me there's pasta?
Why did you say *get home safe* and did you mean it?
Why did you let me walk out of that conversation thinking there was a next one?

Because you fucking promised me—

I press my face into the wool of the sleeve. The fabric faintly smells of her, but mostly of dust. My chest heaves, a sob catching in my throat, transforming into a bizarre, hitching, hiccup.

And then my brain, my absolute traitor of a brain, completely against my will and any sense of occasion—

I press my lips together very hard.

Once The Hands Are Empty.

"Pfft—"

"*PFFT!!*"

I'm gone. Laughing at the table alone at god knows what time at that fugly red jacket. The ugly laugh, through the nose, the one she would have loved.

And I laugh until my stomach hurts.

But nothing is different.

She doesn't even know she won.

You won, Mama.

And then it stops being funny.

Just like that. The laugh runs out the way water runs out and what's underneath is exactly what was there before.

I used to come home and she'd just be there, in that chair, like a fact about the room, like furniture. I never once sat down across from her and thought, *remember this*. I never once held her hand and thought *hold this*. I just sat down. The way you sit down. Because there was always going to be tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow and why—

Why would you hold on tighter to a thing that isn't going anywhere.

That's the thing.

You never know you're full. You don't savour it. Why would you? There is always going to be another Wednesday. Another crossword. Another girls night, another text, another *I love you infinity*. You have never once reached for something and found it gone.

Until you do.

And then you understand in a way that cannot be untaught that every single moment you were ever warm was always going to end. That you were always going to be standing somewhere cold holding something chipped.

The jacket is still hanging over the chair.

I smooth the sleeve without thinking.

I remember her holding it up at the shop.

"It suits you"

Once The Hands Are Empty.

I never answered properly.

I thought there would be another chance.

I can't believe I let every ordinary Wednesday just be another Wednesday.

I know now. You hold on. I know that you look at them, you actually look, you put your hand in their hand and you don't think about what's for dinner or the brioche or whether you locked the door.

She is gone and I know now but I cannot hold her hand.

I cannot go back to a single day.

Knowing doesn't give me anything. It doesn't give me one more memory or one more girls night. I know now. So why does knowing hurt more than anything.

Tonight, all I have to do is try.

Because I can't promise infinity but I can promise tonight.

Mrs K's light from across the street turns off. Mine stays on.