

Warning – Emma Becker

This is your final warning,
The doctor said,
You need to stay in that goddamn bed.
The problem is you see,
It doesn't come with a
Set of instructions or a formal diagnosis.
Just hours of waiting,
Waiting on the unknown.

It's not like a storm warning,
That you would see on the news,
Or some weather guy telling you about all the blues.
But it's more like a tidal surge,
Waiting to strike.
It slowly seemed to wash away,
The dreams you had for life.

I wish it came with a warning,
So I could prepare.
Having some way to predict the unpredictable,
Would be nice...
But there's no time to panic,
You just have to sit and stare.
I wish that I could help you.
And take the pain away.

What if there was a warning?
My mum you see,
A lovely woman,
If I do say so myself.
Born and bred scot,
Always up for a chat and
There with a smile.
Can cheer you up in a heartbeat,
And can make a good brew.

But that week came without a warning.
October 2020.
The infamous year.
I dread the thought stating the virus.
Which has somehow disappeared?

Instead of a warning,
It's changed into a wait.
From a seven day isolation,
To months and months of
Phone Calls.
Hospital Appointments.
Physio.
Occupational Health.
Sick Leave.

And a list of medical terms...

If there was a warning?
What could have changed?
My mum you see,
A lovely woman,
If I do say so myself.
Born and bred scot,
That didn't change...

Although something did change.
Now she wasn't up for a chat
And slowly a frown drew upon her face
No strength to make a good brew
Brain clouded well fog I suppose
Her breaths became short
Blood pressure had risen
Countless medications
Which has names longer than the alphabet
Whirlwind of emotions or
Maybe better described as waves
Each day is unlike the next.

There is something incredible,
Incredible about her determination
Determination to carry on,
Ongoing, endless love for us all,
All of us are there to support...

But there's one thing that continues to cross my mind.
What if there was a warning?

Lucas Porter – Ella Coulby

A great train robbery under the stars, gunshots echoing off the canyon walls, the rich smoke of dynamite choking the air. That's where Lucas Porter would be on this warm, dry evening if it weren't for his wife sat in the rocking chair by the horse pen, slowly losing her mind.

He'd woken sweating in the dark and after finding the bed empty beside him, stumbled out and to the door in the haze of a whiskey daydream he promised he wouldn't wind up in. The nap hadn't meant to last this long, but his afternoon stupor had left him knocked out for hours. The evening air was hot on his face and the smell of horse and the jasmine incense on the porch crawled up his nose, horribly sweet. He was paying the price for the drinks he'd had before his nap, as he squinted against the too-bright sunset with a foggy headache in the doorway. In this moment, old words he'd promised her floated back to him. *'I'll quit drinking, this time.'* It was the day he married her that he put the bottle down, but it was the day she started to lose her mind that he picked it up again. He remembered telling her she'd rescued him from the drink, but now, now her eyes were glassy and she hardly remembered his name, his hand seemed to slip into the glass grip of that bottle more than it ever had before.

She was sat by the half-collapsed fence Lucas had promised to fix months ago in a rocking chair he'd promised to move out of the sun weeks ago. Halfway between the porch and the track beyond the fence where wagons would often ride past, but now boundlessly bare. Dusty ground beneath her bare feet, orange sunset bleeding through her fine hair and the distant silhouettes of horses on the mountain ridges like flies at her head. *I'm going to stare at the mountains today, until my eyes have had enough.* That's what she'd said that morning when Lucas asked her what she was going to do with the day. To Lucas' disappointment, she'd stayed true to her promise. And while she sat there, somewhere between the blurred line of heat drowning the horizon she looked at, she was slowly losing sight of the present moment until her mind was lost in another place, another time. A place where her husband could sip on coladas and watch the birds go by with his feet in the sand and his heart in the sea. A place where a woman like herself could be happy.

If only she had married a rich man, the place she dreamt of wouldn't be so far beyond her reach. Her fateful crumble of sanity would be in well-kept hands of a rich man's money; a happy compromise without Lucas' misfortune. Whereas without her, a bandit like himself would be left to spend his nights in the saloon, surrounded by men who hold their liquor like a barrel, in a dark wooden room heavy with cigar smoke, counting his scant dollars with the scent of blood on his calloused hands. He could still hear the distant sound of a train robbery somewhere in the mountains beyond, but rather than gunshots and screeching metal and dynamite, he heard the music of a life that could've been. If she hadn't rescued him.

Now an old crook, he was tired of murder, tired of adventure. Of course, he could run now, take a horse and ride into the nearest town looking for trouble, but no part of him moved from where he loitered in the doorway of the house, for no part of him wanted to. His eyes were still fixed to his wife, rocking back and forth, back and forth on the chair in the desert. She was a picture of all he'd ever be. A fading picture.

He picked himself up and walked down the porch, stooping to sweep up his hat on the way and dropping the shrew curled in it gently to the ground, and dragged the other chair to where she sat. His heart snagged when he saw her. Gaunt, grey, unseeing eyes searching his face for recognition, beautiful smile lost to the face that framed it. He swallowed down his sorrow.

"Do I look okay?" She asked, her voice soft and musical. Lucas lowered himself into the rocking chair and adjusted his hat.

"As the day I fell in love with you." He said, his own voice rough like sandpaper. No match to hers. But perhaps that was always the way it was supposed to be: she'd forever be the woman who deserved so much more, who deserved the life she dreamt of in her rocking chair, and he'd forever be the man who needed nothing more than her. He reached over and slid his hand in hers as she hummed an old miners tune with those cloudy, unseeing eyes while he fixed his own on her. Behind the gaunt, pale face, there was still the woman he fell in love with. The woman who tamed him. The only woman to ever love him.

"Look at the sunset. Stay awhile." She said. Gladly obliging, he squeezed her hand then sunk back in his chair, letting the orange bleed of the suns wash over him. *My bride, my cure, my dreamer. I'll sit with you long as you wish, darlin' and we'll pretend we're sailing away. Watch the sunset.*

Until my eyes have had enough.

Extract from chapter 1 of: Ten Tragic Days – Benedict Leeder

THE SUN THREW gentle oranges and flowing gold upon the hills around Claro Alto. Claro Alto was waking up with the birds and the birds were singing a sweet song of joy. The pines each climbed high before spindling away into the sky, but the pines did not go as high as the mountains. Above the mountains the trees dissipate, and there aren't many who go up there. The mountain throws out two spurs cut from each other by a narrow and deep river gorge. One spur is wider and there on the high bank is Claro Alto. Cobble streets wind through the town before looping under wooden arches and meeting at the plaza before the *ayuntamiento*. The *ayuntamiento* is a tall building, white with arches along the bottom at the entrances. Blue cornices and pillars wrap around and support the building. At the top, a gable tapers in a bell shape to a round curve and a point, like an upside-down shield. In the middle of the gable is a clock which is striking 8:30. It is the morning. The plaza before the *ayuntamiento* is surrounded by oaks which have not yet grown back their leaves. They spread out thinly and vastly like a web. In those piny hills the oaks were the only trees who were not coloured in blacks or greens. But the oaks were brown, but not all brown, they were almost a gold and shadowed on the other side. They threw shadows over the end of the plaza which were cut and plummeted over the other side of a long, elegant stone wall down the cliffs to be thrown over the river. Up here you could sometimes still hear the waters churn. The houses were all between the streets, white and colourful like the *ayuntamiento*. Then wooden arches that curved over the streets, between buildings were coloured with roses and other flowers.

Frank Williams walked down one street. His shoes clicked and tapped on the cobbles of the street and the sound resonated loudly. He was wearing regular clothes and a sombrero. He turned a corner and, in his march, he was joined by another.

'*Hola, Jorge.*'

'*Hola, gringo.*' Jorge replied.

'Are we getting on the wagon to get back?'

'*Que va, gringo,* I wish to go to the telegraph office, to see if there is any news.'

'They will know of any news at the camp.'

'It will take an hour or more to get there gringo, I wish to know now.'

'He will leave without us soon Jorge.'

'*Que va, gringo,* he leaves us, he doesn't get his *pesos!*'

'Very well, let us go to the telegraph office.'

The telegraph office was a stout building behind the *ayuntamiento*. It was not colourful like the other buildings of Claro Alto. It had two holes for windows and a little cross on the door. They walked inside. Inside was a man, stout like the building, in brown trousers and waistcoat, his shirt was a bright white and his brown coat was hung up on the door. He was also bald, with white hair on the sides of his head.

'*Hola, Caesar.*'

'*Hola, Frank.*'

'We want to hear the news!' Jorge butted in loudly.

'*Es trágico,* it is tragic!' Caesar exclaimed.

'*Que va,* what has happened?'

'The unthinkable!'

'Tell us Caesar please!'

'It is unspeakable!'

'*Que va, Caesar,* you will speak it!'

'OK, fine, but you must know it is hard to bear such news.'

Frank remained silent but began to shuffle impatiently.

'The cadets from Tlalpan, they got together this morning and they arrived at the penitentiary,' Caesar continued, 'they released Diaz.'

'Huzzah! But where is the bad news Caesar?' Jorge pressed.

'I will tell you of it now, they marched on the Santiago Tlatelolco military prison and freed General Reyes.'

'Huzzah!' Jorge cheered.

'Reyes and the cadets marched onward to the National palace and got there at just 7:30 this morning! But it was not to be, *que va,* I cannot speak it.'

'Speak it fool! You must!'

'Calm down Jorge.' Frank finally spoke.

'Reyes was shot off his horse and, *que va*, after the bloodshed was over 400 bodies lay on the ground.' They all fell silent, but he continued.

'*Es trágico*, something terrible has begun and I pray for its end.'

'*Que va*, It cannot be.' Jorge sighed and shook his head.

'It is as I speak it.'

'It is a shame.' Frank commented.

Sunlit Ghosts – Rebecca Mace

Sometimes, it looked as though the sun was falling. Crashing, cascading, tumbling down through a million layers of blissful colour, rays of incarnadine, marigold, lilac, pearl, indigo being smashed apart like a pebble tossed lazily and allowed to plummet into the flat surface of a lake. All the colours torn up and strewn carelessly over the sky, matching up to form a layered canvas of wonder. As it fell, the sun would burn out like a fading candle and leave way for the night to smother the daytime. The delicate, tranquil moment between blazing day and soothing night was fleeting, yet utterly astounding. Some evenings, the sun fell louder than others. Some would adhere to the dramatic intention of the aforementioned canvas of colours, and others would simply slip away without a sound, like leaving a party that nobody really wants you at.

This evening, to Alyssa's thankfulness, was the eye-enticing spectacle that England's coastal skies offered frequently. She sat upon the slanted roof, toes against the gutter and palms hoping for friction against ageing red tiles, chin raised to watch the free-fall of the sunlight. She breathed in the sweet summer aromas, and the remnants of spring, peeling blossoms now littering the floor, fresh petrichor in the air, and wondered if it was her worst trait to imagine what others were thinking of her.

Buzzing, low and sombre, of a lone bee searching for a last drop of nectar before nightfall was audible from the flowerbed two or so metres below, and the frantic birdsong alight with evening chorus cascaded fluidly from every hedgerow and tree in her vicinity. Alyssa cautiously smiled; it was so drastically peaceful up there she was afraid she might get lost in it.

There was a ghost sitting beside her.

Once, not long ago, *she* would've been there.

Their fingers would've touched, each hesitating to alert the other they were cold, and that it was time to venture back within the arms of central heating and cotton linen. Alyssa recalled, quite vividly, that she would've rubbed her hands together against the bracing temperature now settling over their world, like the polar opposite of an electric blanket. *She*, would have pointed out every colour in the sky, *she'd* have known the artistic terms for red, because nothing was ever just red, it was crimson, incarnadine, rose, cherry, magnolia, maroon, scarlet, burgundy and a thousand other names known only to those inclined to study extensive colour theories and pick up paint-brushes for their own enjoyment.

Alyssa looked the ghost directly in the eye. "What are you looking at?" She mused quietly, alone on her rooftop with the blazing fire sinking in the sky.

She decided, that it was a slow reality to lose people. It started out as a drifting sensation, a path to nowhere with no signposts and no footprints to indicate a way forward; or backward. Like you're wandering aimlessly, stumbling with an upside-down map around a cross-roads, and if you aren't careful the devil will be bartering with your shadow for your soul. Until you discover, quite cruelly, that you didn't really know the one you're searching for at all, all your preconceptions and intuitions had been a lie, but now it's too late to ask questions because their world is so far gone from your own. Alyssa wondered if she should forget the ghost, imagining it wasn't going to make *her* real again. Remembering the memories, projecting them onto a faded copy wasn't making life any brighter as the sun simmered and settled below the horizon, and the splashes of glorious colour began to disperse, melting into darkening clouds.

She studied the sky; one day she would forget the ghost on the rooftop – but not this day.

There are ghosts sitting beside everybody; who is sitting beside you?

A Fleeting Encounter – Emma Cunningham

Fumbling, Katherine's feet crossed from the concrete platform onto the padded, patterned carpet of the train. The collection of organised metal and glass that made up the ceiling of Paddington Station was abruptly obscured by the steam train's elegant, wooden interior.

Dragging her pile of cases behind impractically stiletto-encased feet, Katherine stumbled down the corridor, snatching glances at each compartment to decide a suitable seating location. It was like picking a chocolate box; she simply had to decide which assortment she would like best. The first was bursting with a family of six, arms and legs seemed to be everywhere as the children clambered on top of one another like a pile of swarming ants, while the mother desperately attempted to rid the floor of the colony-like mass of bodies that had infested it. Katherine swiftly moved on. The next housed a young couple of love birds, the suitcases by their feet scrawled in black ink with 'JUST MARRIED'. Blind devotion seemed to radiate from the compartment, separating the love bubble from the outside world. Sighing, Katherine strode onwards. The third encased a cluster of eight young men, cigars uniformly placed in each mouth. The smoke being produced from each one had collected to form a thick fog of grey cloud above their heads. To Katherine, it looked like the sky on a sad, rainy day.

The train was in motion now, the usual scenes of London disappearing fast. Katherine tutted impatiently; she still hadn't found anywhere to sit and her feet were about to give way under the discomfort of her dagger-like heels. The final compartment in the carriage was her last hope. Approaching it, she peered through the glass. A man wearing a mud-coloured jacket with a handkerchief peeping out of the pocket stared peacefully out at the vanishing view of the city. He did not appear to be occupied by any particular activity - a cigar was not placed in his mouth nor was there a newspaper on his lap. He seemed middle-aged but the thick wrinkles on his cheeks gave him an ancient appearance, as if his time in the world was coming to a close sooner than normal. A thin slit of a moustache sat awkwardly above his upper lip. Something about the man's presence intrigued Katherine, persuading her to open the compartment's door and take up position on the opposite seat.

Katherine looked awkwardly out of the window, debating whether to start polite conversation. However, before she could make up her mind, the man's dark cavernous eyes had turned to make contact with hers, but no words left his mouth. Katherine blushed furiously as she desperately tried to think of a conversation topic to fill the empty silence. 'Er, are you reading anything interesting?' she asked stiffly, quickly spotting the spine of a book poking out from the man's hand luggage. A faint smile crept along the man's mouth.

'Yes. Prefer writing though, nothing special, just for my own pleasure.'

Curiosity bubbled within Katherine, the old bibliophile of a schoolgirl inside her sat up to pay attention.

'You write? What have you written recently, any preferred genre?'

The man tapped his nose mysteriously. 'I'm not the type to talk much about what I write, a strange old writer's habit I suppose. Have you got a name, young lady?'

'Katherine.'

'George,' he replied.

Katherine hesitated, deciding on whether to continue the conversation. 'I used to quite enjoy Shakespeare's work myself, got introduced to it at school. But recently, I've found a passion for more modern writing. More relevant to today.'

Just like the scenery outside, time seemed to blur, minutes merging together as the two like-minded heads exchanged opinions, past reads, literature debates and future book ideas. Katherine felt freed, as if the usual constraints on women's input in modern literature did not exist within the walls of the compartment, just neutral passion.

'I recently read a dystopian novel set in the future, and would highly recommend it. "1984" is what it's called, one of Orwell's works. Came out a few months ago. One of the best novels I've read for years. Had me thinking for weeks about what the future may hold,' Katherine explained eagerly.

Those dark eyes looked at her curiously.

'Oh really? It sounds rather intriguing.'

Conversation once again spiralled into deep theories about the future, and time submerged itself under a pool of nothingness. After what could have been minutes, or perhaps hours, the cream-tiled platforms of Lime Street station rolled into view, the impatient faces of travellers could be seen queuing outside.

'I'm afraid this is me,' said Katherine wistfully, disappointed that the train could not simply continue for evermore. The man nodded his head in polite farewell. 'Stay safe young lady, keep that passion alive! We need more thinkers like you in our world today.'

Katherine smiled once more, collected her pile of luggage and slipped out of the compartment door, immediately lost in the fast-flowing current of rushing passengers.

The man took out his latest work, '1984', from his hand luggage and smiled.

'I'm so pleased you liked my work, Katherine.' he whispered softly.

Rose Tattoo – Lilly Cousens

The man carried his daughter in his arms, cradling her debilitated body as her light and unsteady breath stuttered. He opened the door to their home, the creak of the hinges ominous and piercing. Moonlight drifted through the windows, but otherwise it was pitch-black, and the air was frigid and bitter. With a disdainful look and a weak snap of his fingers, he set one of the many candles alight, the flame dancing merrily.

Mockingly.

His hoary beard, along with his body and clothes, was wet with rainwater and blood, the crimson liquid falling delicately onto the once pristine oak floors. Leaving a trail of ichor behind him, he dragged the two of them past the table on which slept his pipe - static and untouched - before he collapsed, his knees aching from the thud of the impact.

His eyes, usually full of confidence and pride, were now filled with doubt and angst. His smirk had been replaced with a trembling frown, blood seeping into it from freshly cut scars.

He took a deep breath before he rolled the young woman onto the floor, laying her on her back. He heaved with the effort and examined her injuries. She was bloodied, cut and bruised; her body mangled and maimed. He checked her pulse and examined that, although her breath was shallow, she was at least breathing. Praise God. Praise God.

He opened his bag hurriedly and prayed that none of his ingredients had been ruined by the rain. To his immediate relief, no ingredient had been ruined, and he tipped out an array of – mostly – dry animal parts and herbal plants in various assorted containers. He scrambled to find the correct ones before he tipped them onto the floor, before moving his hands over them in a rhythmic fashion.

His daughter groaned in agony. The smell of blood was potent, a sickening metallic smell that surrounded them. Perhaps only slightly better than the smell of death itself. She squirmed slightly and tried to say something that resembled 'Dad'. Something fell in his chest.

No, no. The spell wouldn't work if he wasn't focused. He rolled up his sleeve, revealing a tattoo of a singular scarlet red rose. The name inside, the name of the girl before him, began to glow in a coruscating violet as he muttered the incantation, his eyes glowing an identical shade. His voice was low and rich but scared. Too many What ifs. Too many.

The ingredients seeped into her body, violet ribbons constricting her limbs and chest. Healing energy flowed into her, convulsing and straining as it surged through her veins.

And just as hope began to shine through, she stopped. Her body limp, her sound drowned out by the rain.

The man, enervated, simply stared. What could he do? Nothing other than sit and watch. Sit and hope that she would open her eyes and breathe. One breath.

The spell hadn't worked. The spell that should have been a failsafe hadn't worked. His blood-stained hands trembled. One breath.

And that was it. How life could be taken so underwhelmingly, he could never know. And how cruel hope was. How cruel.

His reality sunk in. It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair. And she was gone, but she was here, in front of him, but she was gone, and it wasn't fair. And she was gone. And that was it.

Until she began to stir.