

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED

A person wearing a dark blue hoodie with the hood pulled up over their head. The person's face is completely obscured by the hood. Their right hand is raised to their chin, with the index finger pointing upwards, a common gesture for silence or secrecy. The hoodie has a yellow zipper and trim. The background is a dark, solid color.

BRIAN LANCASTER

ONE
OVERHEARD

In the early hours, undisturbed, I can complete fifty lengths of the twenty-metre Callico House basement pool without stopping or tiring. I surrender to instinct and let my body take over, using a punishing freestyle, length after length, back and forth.

Just me and the water and the echoes.

Albert used to say I lose myself when I swim, but he's wrong. I find myself. My mind and senses sharpen, polarise. Above the rapid slap of strokes and the rush of water, I can hear every noise, sense every shift in air pressure, every smell permeating the heavily chlorinated water, every movement in the spotlit room of white marble.

Albert's brother-in-law, Coleman, watches me swim sometimes. Observing from the shadow of the bamboo screen that conceals the changing room door, he thinks I don't see him. For a time, I wondered if Coleman might not be as straight as he likes people to believe.

I told Albert. He sighed the way he always did and told me the answer is far simpler. Coleman's envious because he never learnt to swim, something I find not only ludicrous

but sad. At forty-one, he is known to have thousands stashed away in bills and bonds, antiques and properties, and obscene amounts of liquid funds inherited from his grandfather. I asked Albert why he didn't employ an expert coach to give him private lessons. Coleman felt he had left some things too late in life, and regarded himself as an old pedigree, too stubborn to learn new tricks.

Nobody else in residence uses the pool. Not anymore. On Sundays, when there are unlikely to be guests, I enjoy this second swim in the early afternoon, my way of avoiding the possibility of bumping into any of Albert's family members. I will miss this room and ritual more than anything else when they kick me out.

After hauling myself out of the deep end, I pick up my towel and dry off before a chaise longue of wine red leather and gold paintwork set against one wall half way down, an odd choice for a room otherwise empty of furniture. Pool light reflections shimmer across the walls and ceiling as the pool's surface calms.

I pull on my track suit and slippers, and begin to head for the backstairs up to my bedroom, when I hear the familiar heavy clunk of the front door closing and the voice of Edward Callico announcing his arrival. Edward's wife, Alice, will be with him and, assuming they will congregate in the communal living area, I head up instead to the drawing room.

If you're rich and famous enough to be invited into the Callico family's London home—a three-storey Grade II listed townhouse built of Portland stone and set in the heart of Mayfair—you will be requested, upon your arrival, to wait in the drawing room to the left of their grand front entrance. Even in this day and age, the Callicos adhere to ludicrously strict and antiquated formalities. Waiting guests

are seated in the antechamber until summoned. Reputedly modernised in the early twentieth century, the Persian carpeted room is home to a horseshoe of leather sofas and encased in glass fronted oak bookcases housing scores of medical journals from across the ages. Crammed into a small recess, there stands a tall wingback chair in ripped and age worn black leather. Appearing neither comfortable nor convenient, with a sure chance of snagging an item of clothing while perched on the exposed edge, no visitor willingly chooses to sit there.

But the chair holds a secret.

In the wall behind the wingback there's a small vent—possibly created to promote airflow but I like to think its placement is more artful—allowing those seated to hear everything being said in the next room. According to Albert the seat became his grandfather's favourite during the years of his retirement up until his death. Albert talked fondly of the old man, the minutes wasted searching the vast house for him, calling out his name, only to find him in this chair, long legs sticking out and crossed at the ankle, book in lap, snoring softly at the ceiling.

In the three years I have lived here, I rarely ever used the room. Not until three months ago. Out of curiosity, I took to sitting crossed-legged in the shabby chair to check my phone or read my well-thumbed paperback of the complete works of Dickens, which is how I discovered the old man's secret.

"Where Gabriel goes is none of my concern," comes the voice of Edward Callico, brother of Albert. Even though he talks about me in hushed tones, I can make out every public-school-enunciated word. "I simply do not want to have to explain his presence at the funeral or at the gathering here afterwards. I want him gone from our lives,"

"Surely you're inviting him to Albert's funeral," says Alice, Edward's wife, and the only decent person among their family members. Alice labels herself a BBC—British born Chinese—and is more educated and better mannered than all of the Calico siblings combined. And I include Albert in that assessment. When we first met, Albert was a man of remarkable intelligence, but very little patience and even less common sense or civility.

"Why should I?" replies Edward. "You know how I feel about him. His existence in our lives is an embarrassment."

Where Albert followed in his father's footsteps into the field of medicine—medical research, to be precise—Edward decided to break with family tradition and specialise in contemporary business and computer technology, founding his own cybersecurity company. Most of his work is tied up in government contracts. Nobody is exactly sure what they do, least of all Alice.

"Albert's friends and colleagues will expect him to be there," she says.

"To the best of my knowledge, Albert's current colleagues have never met him. And the closest thing he had to friends were in the minibus with him. I am thinking of our own family and connections. Imagine trying to explain him away to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, or better still to Great Aunt Beatrix and Uncle Hector. As far as I am concerned, the sooner he is gone from this house, the better."

"Does he have friends he can stay with?" asks Alice.

"Why are you asking us? You are the only one he ever speaks to. If you have no idea, why on earth would we? The point is, the house is legally mine now and I want him out."

"For pity's sake, Ed. Can't you at least give him a couple more weeks to find somewhere—"

"My decision is final. It has already been over a week since the accident. He has had plenty of time to sort himself out."

Poor Alice. Appealing to Callico family compassion is like trying to draw water from a dried up well. Alice is flawed in their eyes. She has a heart, morals and a conscience, and is therefore deemed weak. In a moment of levity, Albert once told me she could never be a true Callico, not because of her Asian heritage, but because she lacked a silver spoon shoved in her mouth and an Oxbridge rowing oar stuck up her arse.

"I'm sorry, Alice," says Victoria, her deep voice almost masculine. "But I have to agree with my brother. Gabriel has a job working at the charity now, so he has independent means. If you go soft on him, he's likely to take advantage, like he did with poor Bertie. And then we'll never be rid of him."

Victoria is wrong. I don't want to keep living here, suffocating on their old-world opulence and being a party to their petty squabbles. Not without Albert. He was the one who insisted I move into this mausoleum, insisted I do so partly to assuage his conscience by letting him give me somewhere to live, and partly to help ground him. The arrangement was never meant to have been long term. His family believes us to be lovers, and although I know Albert had feelings for me, he referred to himself humorously as gay-asexual. Aesthetically, he preferred the naked male form but considered the act of sex in any form messy and unhygienic. On the rare occasion, he would watch me jerk off to porn. But he would not even entertain the idea of oral sex, giving or receiving. Although we shared a bed, I was little more than a personal companion.

"Would Albert have left him anything? In his will?"

comes Alice's voice again. I like Alice, and I usually love her tenacity, but right now I wish she would shut up and back down.

"A piffling sum," says Edward. "Nothing substantial. Mrs Hammond-Clyde has arranged to see him tomorrow at her Pimlico office. Hopefully it is enough to see him off once and for all."

"And what if he challenges the will?" asks Alice. "Have any of you considered that possibility?"

"On what grounds?" snaps Edward. "Legally, he is nothing to this family."

"He was your brother's partner. They were together for three years. Surely that counts for something in the eyes of the law? Even if it doesn't, I can't believe you're willing to toss him out onto the street like unwanted furniture."

Alice knows more about me than most but that's still very little. This wouldn't be the first time I'd been homeless. When I met Albert, while I was working in a gay bar on Compton Street, I'd lived on the streets through a harsh winter and survived intact. None of them know about my darker days and what I did to pull through. If they did, if I gave them all the sordid details, even Alice might shudder and reevaluate her opinion of me.

"Don't waste your breath, Ally." Coleman's American accent is usually a refreshing change from the clipped British voices. Today he slurs vaguely, more than likely drunk again, which of late appears to be the only way he can endure remaining married to Victoria. "You should know by now the Callicos make the Borgias look like a bunch of amateurs. Don't expect any mercy when your time comes."

"Do shut up, Coleman," says Victoria.

"Where is he now?" asks Edward.

"Probably in his bedroom," says Alice. "He's barely left since the news broke."

Normally, she would be right. Except for my early morning swims, I have holed up in the bedroom since she called me with the news and, predicting my disbelief, forwarded me a 'breaking news' link from her phone. Mrs Buckland, the housekeeper, places a tray outside the door around mealtimes, usually a mug of tea and a sandwich.

"Staring into that damned phone, most likely," says Victoria.

"Somebody needs to remind him about tomorrow," says Edward. "I don't want him missing his appointment."

"He knows. But I'll send him a text reminder," says Alice, her tone resigned. "Are we finished here?"

"Is there any update on Sylvie?" asks Coleman, as I am about to rise and creep quietly upstairs using the back stairway. But I want to hear everything they have to say.

In the minibus crash that took Albert's life, Doctor Sylvie Leblanc—Albert's former colleague and a college friend of Coleman's—survived with broken limbs and, more worryingly, head injuries. I met her only once along with Albert's other friends at dinner the night before they set off on their fateful journey. Only Sylvie survived the crash.

"Still in a coma," says Victoria. "But her condition is stable. Thankfully."

"Thankfully," scoffs Coleman.

"You know what I mean. Compared to the alternative."

Alice told me the police are pinning hopes on her waking, and being well enough to provide a firsthand account of what happened.

"Do we know when the other doctor's—" begins Edward.

"Stephan. Stephan Dytrovich—" says Alice.

"Yes. Do we know when his funeral is taking place?"

"It already has. Dr Dytrovich was Muslim," says Victoria. "In keeping with tradition, his funeral took place quickly, the second day after he died. His family is observing a period of mourning and I sent them a card and a sympathy basket of food on behalf of the Callico family. Fortunately, Fortnums deliver."

"Of course they do," mutters Coleman.

"None of us have to show up to anything then? No ceremony?" asks Edward.

"Not unless we want to go to their home and pay our respects directly to—" begins Alice.

"We can do that at Albert's ceremony this Wednesday. If they choose to attend," says Edward. "Do you want to give everyone an update, Alice? On the funeral arrangements?"

Edward has always relied on Alice to arrange things outside of his work. She is one of those naturally organised persons who, once given a project, never, ever drops the ball. Once she has covered everything including answering a few questions, the room goes quiet for a while.

"Do the police have any updates?" asks Coleman. "About what caused the crash?"

"Only what we already know," comes Alice's voice. "The driver lost control of the minibus. Maybe his concentration slipped for a second or more likely he fell asleep at the wheel. The police say the autopsy showed relatively high levels of alcohol and traces of an antidepressant medication in his bloodstream. I am more inclined to believe he'd still been drunk from the night before. Although he seemed fine when I spoke to him in the kitchen before they set off, having tea and toast with Mrs Buckland."

"Highly functioning alcoholics are masters at disguising their true drunken states," says Victoria.

"Fuck you, dear," says Coleman.

There is another pause and once again I wonder if they are done.

"Okay," says Victoria eventually, her deep tone turning serious. "I'm going to put this out there, seeing as none of you have the balls to do so. Am I the only person in this room who believes that Gabriel had a hand in this accident?"

What the fuck?

"He was supposed to be travelling in the minibus with them that morning. Doesn't the fact that he decided to change his plans at the last minute mean anything to any of you? How can you know he didn't tamper with the vehicle?"

"You can't be serious?" says Alice, her voice aghast. "Even for you that is low?"

"Forgive my wife, Alice," says Coleman. "She has always had a flair for the dramatic."

"Will you shut up, Coleman," says Victoria. "I am simply echoing what we all feel. That there is something distinctly unsavoury about the man."

"I'm sorry, but have to agree with my wife, Victoria," says Edward. "You're being paranoid. If anyone had tampered with the vehicle, the police would no doubt have found something. They did not. But they did ask about all of our whereabouts the morning of the accident, and Gabriel didn't leave his bedroom that morning, not until after Albert's party had left, and then only to use the pool."

After the conversation tails off, I stand and decide there and then to make my final escape from this antiquated zoo in the morning when I leave for the solicitor's appointment. None of them need to know. I'll call Alice once I've packed up and gone, but I am not wasting my breath on any of the

others. I am not even angry at Victoria's accusation which affirms that I should not be around these toxic people any longer.

In anticipation, I fire off a text to ask if I can stay a few nights with an old friend, Josh, and his partner Nishan. They already know the story of what happened. Most of the country does by now. Hopefully they might let me bed down at theirs until I've found somewhere more permanent.

Almost as soon as I finish texting, another messages buzzes on my phone from my employer at the charity. Somewhat generously—probably because Albert was a patron—the board members have decided to offer me another three weeks' paid compassionate leave, which should give me time to find somewhere else to live.

Albert helped me in many ways; to get a job and open a bank account, to get a passport and basically to become visible in the eyes of the world.

All I wish for right now is to have my old invisibility back.