

SOMETIMES YOU'RE BETTER OFF NOT KNOWING

INHERITED

A person wearing a dark blue hoodie with the hood pulled up over their head. Their face is completely obscured by the hood. They are making a 'shh' gesture with their right hand, with the index finger pointing upwards and the other fingers curled. The hoodie has orange stitching along the zipper and the hood's edge.

BRIAN LANCASTER

THREE

PIGPEN

I refuse Hammond-Clyde's offer to pay for an Uber and use my travel card to catch the bus back to Mayfair. I prefer the anonymity of being among strangers on public transport. One of those new glossy designs, the red London bus is all sleek curved edges and huge tinted windows. On the upper deck, few people—tourists probably—are around, so I take a vacant seat at the back, pull up my grey hoodie and dig out my phone to check the time.

I need space to think and regroup. My time spent with Albert has softened me. And now, I have allowed myself to be sidetracked by shock and confusion—maybe even a little grief—and have not considered how to move forward. More importantly, I have not been paying attention to my instincts at minor but troubling signs. And the news of Albert intending to renovate the ruins of a house in Italy, a derelict plot of land that now belongs to me, something he told me very little about, makes no sense. For a man whose attention to detail bordered on obsessive-compulsive, someone fixated on seeing every one of his projects through to the end, this does not add up.

Victoria was right when she said that I had initially planned to travel with Albert and his friends in the minibus to enjoy the city of Brussels—my first time ever travelling abroad—while Albert attended the daytime lectures and official evening dinner on Saturday. We had been set to leave on Friday evening, but somewhere along the way, plans had changed. On Thursday morning, Albert claimed to have neglected to inform me they would be leaving early Friday morning instead. I would need to come later. For a man who planned each hour of his day in advance, this omission of detail was entirely out of character.

We both knew the charity I work for had signed me up on Friday to attend an emergency first aid programme with a compulsory end-of-course test and certification. After hearing about the new arrangements, sitting on the bed Thursday morning as Albert came out of the bathroom, I told him I would phone and reschedule my attendance on the training course. Unusually for us, we had argued fiercely, with Albert eventually losing his temper and demanding I do as told, to stop being obstinate and stay behind one more bloody day. I remember being irritated that he had already organised an open coach ticket for me, which meant I could travel out Friday evening. I somewhat petulantly accused him of purposely not telling me about the change to avoid having to apologise to his colleagues about the medical moron in their midst.

That Thursday evening, everyone met at Callico House for dinner and to stay the night. Even with its twelve bedrooms, Albert rarely accommodated guests, with only our bedroom and the one occupied by Victoria and Coleman in constant use. Edward and Alice have their own penthouse in the heart of Marylebone.

Albert often talked about the absurdity and obscenity of

having such a grand house with many empty rooms. But his hands had been tied by his forefathers, who forbade inheritors from selling or signing the mausoleum over to a charity or other organisation. Albert believed that not having children of his own to propagate the family line was nothing short of noble.

Not only had Albert arranged rooms for everyone that night, including his former colleagues Sylvia and Stephan, but he had brought in a favourite chef to cook dinner for them and the whole family, eight people including me. Everyone else had been in good spirits that night, and after questions about the conference had dried up, Sylvia and Coleman had shared entertaining anecdotes about their college days. When discussions broke into smaller groups, Sylvia and Coleman carried on chatting. Victoria seemed to be having a difference of opinion with Edward about something, which was not an unusual occurrence. With Albert and Stephan knowing each other and deep in earnest conversation, I had Alice pretty much to myself.

I had been petulant with Albert in the bedroom later that evening, threatening to unpack my rucksack and not join him in Brussels at all, telling him I might instead prefer to spend the weekend with gay friends in London—a threat I held in reserve to stoke his jealousy and one I never once capitalised upon.

Even now, I sense something had been troubling him, the way he kept insisting that me remaining behind was for the best. I had not even seen him off in the early morning when he left. Instead, I stayed in the bedroom until I heard them leave, then went down to swim. Only during a coffee break on the training course did I find his string of text messages and idiotic emojis. At the time, I glanced at them once but paid them little heed and replied to none.

Looking back, I can't help thinking that he had unknowingly saved my life by asking me to travel later. With time on my side now and out of morbid curiosity, I thumb open the app and find his texts. They are easy to find. Few people call or text me. Even as I read the first one he sent that fateful morning, my heart sinks at my pettiness during our last exchange.

Please don't be mad at me. In the morning rush left my notebook in the bedroom 📖
🚗 🛏

I'd forget my own head if it wasn't screwed on! 🤪🤪 ! 🚗 🧠 !

Nothing important, just research notes !
📖 🧠 📏 !

Can you bring with you on coach tonight?
🌙 🚗 🚗 🚗 🚗 🚗

Everyone in good spirits, discussing best bars in Brussels 🍷 🤪 🍷 🚗 🌙 !

I should really stay in and work 📖 🤪 ! 🧠
📖 🌙

Driver says we should be in Brussels by noon 🤪 🚗 ! 🚗 🍷 ! 🚗 🍷 !

Stephan already complaining about Puchinsky 🤪 🍷 🌙 🚗

Fun weekend ahead! 🍷 🧠 📖 🚗 🚗 🚗 🚗

Maybe I shall join them for drinks tonight
🚗 🌙 🤪 🚗 🍷 🤪

Take the edge off 🤪 🚗 🧠 📏 🤪

Let me know how the course goes 📏 !
🚗 🚗

Safe journey and look forward to drinks
and fun later 🚌😓🍷🍷🌙🍷

Getting text messages with a string of nonsensical emoticons from Albert was not unusual. For an esteemed medical professional, he had developed an aberrant fondness for them, a side of him that surprised even me. His family hated them. Victoria blamed me, said that after I showed him how to insert them, I must have infected his brain with my childish, adolescent ways. But he had always been that way and loved nothing better than to relax by playing card games, travel chess, online puzzles, or watching old crime series like Inspector Morse or Dalgliesh or Luther on cable.

No, him using emoticons was not unusual. Getting multiple messages in short succession most definitely was. At the time, I assumed he had nothing better to do, but on reflection, Albert would usually have slept. He told me he could fall asleep anywhere, power nap, a professional technique he had developed, something he often did during cab or coach rides or on short flights.

I am about to pop my phone away when a cold revelation stops me. What if the emoticons contain a hidden message?

Albert loved reading about code-breaking. Before I met him, he had read everything available about Alan Turing, the gay mathematician who cracked the enigma code. Apart from following dutifully in his father's footsteps, what Albert learnt about Turing formed a large part of why he chose to work in medical research. He equated sickness and disease and viruses as riddles waiting to be solved.

He also had a fondness for old mystery books where the detective or mystery solver uses cards with holes punched

in them to cover text and highlight single letters. Using this, a hidden message would be uncovered. He introduced me to Freemason's cypher, more commonly known as pigpen cypher, where letters are arranged in grids—or pigpens—and exchanged for symbols. To better explain this, we devised a simple cypher together using characters from our phones, substituting letters for emoticons, including ones to represent common double vowels or consonants. Albert enjoyed the exercise, and we used the cypher a couple of times, usually to send innocuous messages to each other during office hours or while enduring meetings with family members, adding the emoticon code to make later plans. Eventually, the novelty wore off, especially as I could not keep up with his super-fast brain and his ability to memorise the entire letter emoticon cypher.

I haul open the flap of my rucksack and pull up the old file on my tablet. After searching around, I eventually find the note containing the pigpen and match the emoticons against my phone containing the string Albert sent me. The first one makes no sense, with a couple of symbols not assigned to our code. But having come this far, I persevere on to the next.

End of the second message.

😬=G 🌀=E ! =T 🚐=O 🤝=U ! =T

GET OUT.

Coldness washes over me, a mix of fear and excitement. For some reason, I feel the need to check around to see if anyone is spying on me. Satisfied that nobody is, I move on to the other messages and reveal Albert's last instructions:

TRUST
NOBODY
IFIDONT
RETURN

GOTOITALY

FIND

LURIABIO

INEAGLE

HOUSE

STAY

OFFLINE.

When I am finished decoding, my mind is reeling. My heart beats faster, my breathing more profound, my senses becoming clearer, survival instincts kicking in. Incredibly, I find the sensation liberating. Within seconds I am scanning every person on the upper deck for potential threats.

The only line of emoticons that doesn't signify is about finding Luriabio. Perhaps Luriabio is a person or a place. Eagle House makes perfect sense now. The derelict building site in Italy. But the words that keep echoing in my brain are 'trust nobody'.

What did Albert know?

When I look up, and out of the bus window, the bus is turning into Oxford Street. I scan the road outside, curious to see the turning for Callico House, wondering if the secrets concern Albert's family. As the bus crawls along past the turning, I crane forward, pressing my forehead against the cold glass, only to spy three white squad cars in the distance, at the far end of the road leading into the heart of Mayfair, sitting outside the entrance to my former home, their lights flashing.

I thrust myself back in my seat, even though nobody could possibly spot me from outside the house. An instinct to survive seems to crystallise inside me, even if I have no idea right now what it means. I am tempted to call Alice, but whenever I think about the emojis for 'trust nobody', I hear Albert's voice. When he gave firm advice, I listened.

Instead of getting off at my stop, I remain on the bus and continue toward Tufnell Park.

Josh suggested meeting up outside the tube station at six. I cannot go back to Callico House now. How can I, when a place I have always considered toxic might also turn out to be dangerous, deadly even? Just after midday, and I now have a whole afternoon to kill. I need to hear a friendly voice.

"Angel Gabriel. How's it hanging?" comes Josh's cheerful voice, by way of an old greeting.

"Are we still good for tonight?"

"You bet. Actually I was going to text you. Instead of hanging around outside the tube entrance—we've both done enough of that in our time—there's a pub called the Frog and Fox on the high street. Bit of a dump but the beer's decent enough. I clock off at five so I'll meet you there for a quickie at six and then we can head to my place. Shan is working from home so he's knocking up some food in your honour. How does that sound?"

"Josh, tell him not to go out of his way. We can order takeout—"

"Are you kidding. He loves showing off. And his food is amazing. Learnt from his Bengali grandmother, so he says. Not that I give a shit who he learnt from as long as he feeds me."

"And Josh—"

"Of course you can stay over. But you're on the sofa bed. We don't do threesomes."

"Still the funny guy."

"We had a feeling you might want to get away right now. How long do you need? A week? Two? At least until after you've been to the funeral?"

"I'm not going to the funeral—"

"What the fuck!"

"It's fine. The family don't want me there, and I don't want to be anywhere near the family. It's a win-win. Long story."

"Are you okay, mate? You sound weird. Well, weirder than normal. Must have been a rough time for you over—"

"It's not that, Josh," I say and then hesitate. "I'll tell you all about it tonight."

"Sounds ominous."

"You have no idea."

"You in trouble?"

"Not with the law, if that's what you're asking. Just some strange things going down."

"Where are you now?"

"On the bus. Heading into your neck of the woods. Going find a coffee shop and get some lunch. I'm not going back to the house."

"Hold on a moment, Gabe."

There is a pause at the end of the phone, and I hear him talking to somebody, muffled voices, nothing unusual. Eventually, he comes back to me.

"I just sweet-talked my manager who I now owe big time. I'm leaving a bit earlier, so that I can meet you at four in the Frog. We're not doing this over the phone. And I'll tell Shan to get his skates on. Can you make yourself busy until then?"

A wave of gratitude fills me. I know I can rely on Josh. We have been in genuinely tricky situations together in the past and helped each other out. If there is anyone in the world I can trust with Albert gone, it's Josh.

"Perfect. See you at four."