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## Key-Holders

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## KEY - HOLDERS

There was a private garden outside my window that summer. Key-holders only. I had a key, but never went in because I always hated the idea of a locked-up park and because, really, it was Papa Nelson's key anyway and not mine at all.

Actually, it was his window too, looking out from inside his apartment, and I was just a visitor there while taking summer courses at NYU.

Not that I was really going to class or anywhere else back then, let alone to a locked-up garden. All I seemed to have the energy for was going to the corner grocer for pancake mix. I must've gone through a hundred boxes of it before Independence Day.

Stir, cook, flip, dump in the trash.

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I threw the pancakes away because I was never hungry in those days—hadn't been since moving into the apartment. And I only cooked them in the first place because it seemed better than crying on the floor or standing naked in front of the window wishing someone would acknowledge me.

Around the third week of me calling my mother crying, crying, Why-Can't-I-Stop-Crying, she suggested I might be depressed and asked me to Please-Stop-Calling and Maybe-See-a-Doctor.

Only, I didn't figure I was really-truly *clinically* depressed because, when I actually managed to drag myself out of the apartment, I faked things pretty well. It was mustering the energy to go anywhere to begin with that was the problem. So instead of going to a doctor, I'd just start making pancakes again.

Papa Nelson, my papa's Papa, was spending the summer in DC with his new wife, so he'd agreed to let me stay in his New York place while I was in school. The New Wife didn't trust me though, and Papa Nelson was either too cowardly or too senile to stand up for me, his only granddaughter, so every day I had to be ready in case they decided to "drop in" and make sure I wasn't pissing on the rugs or fucking the doorman on the New Wife's precious antique settee.

The apartment itself looked and smelled thickly of other people's lives. I felt like a ghost haunting the wrong house. Had that stain on the carpet been there for years (juice spilled from a sippy cup), or was it recent (wine sloshed at a cocktail party)? And how long had it taken Papa Nelson to assemble that wall of matchbooks in the kitchen?—one from every restaurant he'd ever been to in New York.

Hundreds of them. Hundreds of logos, names, and colors. And *thousands* of matches.

He stopped collecting them after Nana Ruth died. Or, maybe because Nana Ruth died.

I only ever met her once, at a Christmas party, and that was well after everyone agreed that the Alzheimer's had sucked her dry and left only the bitter, frightened parts behind. The slime coating the insides of an eggshell.

When I first arrived back in May, I spent hours staring up at the wall of matchbooks, wondering why Papa Nelson had put a cap on the collection. Had he lost some spark or drive when he lost Nana Ruth? Or did her death simply strike him as a good time to start ending other things as well?

By June I didn't wonder about it anymore. And by July I only wondered about how mad he'd be when he "dropped in" next and found that I'd struck through nearly every one of his beloved matches. There were only two of them left. Two matches in a single book from someplace I'd never heard of called Teddy's Reddy.

I was about to strike up one of that final pair to light the old gas stove, ready for another batch of garbage pancakes, when a knock hit the door.

*Maybe they'll go away*, I thought, but then the knock came again. It felt like someone had snuck up and rapped their knuckles straight across my forehead—*Hello? Anybody in there?*

No, I would've told them. Now go away.

Only, they kept knocking. I looked down at the match, sighing, and decided to go see who it was. After all, if I used up a perfectly good match only to get interrupted by an intruder or something, then there'd only be one left before I'd have to go out to the grocery store and restock.

*Maybe I'll get one of those plastic, long-necked lighters*, I thought, shuffling down the hall. *Probably burn myself less that way.*

I opened the door and found Nana Ruth frowning up at me from her wheelchair.

"You certainly took your sweet time coming to let me into my own home," she said, and ran over three of my toes as she wheeled in past me.

Nana Ruth had always been a big woman. Even when she was bed-ridden and losing weight all the time, she'd still been big. And death, it seemed, was no exception. The chair squeaked miserably beneath her weight and her wrinkly breasts hung off her chest like a pair of giant, white bats.

"Nana Ruth, hi. Come in." I was already exhausted. "I didn't know you were coming over."

"Where else would I go in this damned chair?" she said, keying the New Wife's antique settee as she passed it.

"Why'd I have to let you in if you already had keys?"

"For the garden," she said, and waved for me to follow her back into the kitchen. "You were making us pancakes, weren't you?"

She stopped before the great wall of matchbooks, their covers all bent and discolored from my handling them and tearing out their insides. I was afraid she might be angry, but instead she only grinned at them and said, "You always were a sentimental old dope, Nellie boy."

Wheeling into the kitchen, she heaved herself onto one of the breakfast bar's cushioned stools and watched as I used up the second-to-last of Teddy's Reddy's matches.

I nearly trashed the fresh pancakes just out of habit, but then Nana Ruth cleared her throat and I remembered to plate them instead.

"Any syrup?" she said, pulling a fork out from inside her helmet of hair.

I checked the fridge and cabinets. "No syrup. There's some strawberry jam that hasn't expired yet."

She made a face like I'd suggested she try smearing shit on her food instead. She shook her head at me. "Just come sit next to me," she said, and patted her stool's neighbor.

It was easy to do as I was told. Comforting, even. I sat next to her, but hadn't thought to grab a fork from the drawer or to keep a spare hidden on my person like she had. I stared at my plate, too tired to get up again, and then realized I could just fold up the dry cakes and eat them like taco shells.

"What's it like being dead?" I asked.

She shrugged as she chewed, her sharp jaw working like a machine. "What's it like having depression?"

I shrugged back. “I don’t know. Your bones kind of hurt, so you don’t want to move anymore. Then you realize you wouldn’t want to move anyway, because moving is pointless. Not in a bad way, exactly—not like a super negative thing. Just pointless.”

“You cry an awful lot for it to just be pointless.” She said it thoughtfully rather than sad or sympathetically. Interested more than concerned.

I shrugged again. “The crying’s pointless too. It just happens. You get trapped in it, and then you realize you don’t care anymore. You forget what it’s like to care about things.”

Nana Ruth nodded grimly. “I know everything there is to know about being trapped,” she said. “And I know even more about forgetting things.”

“What’s your favorite thing to remember?” I asked.

She chewed a while, which I figured was probably the same thing as thinking. Her jaw working as a crank for her brain.

“The wizard,” she decided.

“The wizard?”

“The wizard trapped inside that tree out in the garden. The private one,” she said, nodding, eating more pancake. She’d nearly finished; I’d barely begun. “Merlin.”

“Nana, Merlin isn’t in the garden next door.” I said it as if I knew.

She slammed her fork down. “Yes. He. Is. The witch Vivien sealed him up in that tree centuries ago and that’s where he’s been ever since.”

“Merlin was a Brit, Nana Ruth. If he ever lived, he lived in England—That means not here.”

“Well, look who knows everything all of a sudden! And here I thought it was all pointless.” She scraped her fork over the breakfast bar, digging Zen garden-esque lines deep into the laminate. “We nabbed that tree off its island a long time ago. Dug it up, stuck it on a boat, and carted it here. Just another immigrant.”

I didn’t say anything, but she could tell I still didn’t believe her. Maybe she read it in my chew-crank.

“Come on then,” she said, hoisting herself up and back into her wheelchair. “I’ll show you—And don’t you forget to bring that last match either.”

I thought about saying I didn’t want to go, but couldn’t work up the energy to argue. I thought about offering to push her chair, but then decided to do it without asking. It gave me something to lean on as we went.

The park was small, shaded by dozens of trees, and surrounded by people walking their dogs and wishing they could go inside. A woman in pink walking a Dalmatian watched Nana Ruth's key-holding hand with particular nastiness as I pushed her along. Nana Ruth didn't seem bothered though, not by the glares or by the yellow July heat. She only reached up her trembling hand and rattled the key in its lock.

The gate creaked as it opened and a deep green shadow rolled out before us like a carpet. I pushed Nana Ruth inside and, though neither of us ever looked back, I had a notion that the gate itself took care to lock up again behind us.

Inside, the trees hugged beautiful, well-mown glades and red poppies stood guard alongside bright blue benches. Against the gravel path, Nana Ruth's wheels churned like watermills.

I didn't need to ask which tree was Merlin's.

The other trees all had very typical tree-like looks: trunks made of wood, branches made of skinnier wood, and leaves that weren't made of wood at all. But the Merlin Tree didn't look like it was made of any of these—only hard, wrinkled skin. Almost like Nana Ruth's skin, if hers hadn't been soft and white as glue.

I parked us at its base where some of the roots had boiled up over the ground.

"What now?" I asked, watching as she plucked one of the red poppies that the little sign said you weren't supposed to pluck. It occurred to me then that the sign probably didn't apply to people anymore once they were dead.

"Teddy's Reddy," was all she said, and held out her hand.

I laid the book in her open palm and took an instinctive step backward as she struck up the final match. With only the lightest touch, she turned the flower into a torch.

"Nana Ruth?" I said, but she wasn't listening to me. I looked around behind us, but no one seemed to notice us the way they had outside the gate.

I turned back as she struggled to her feet once more. The flames threw an orange glow across her lined face like a campfire on a cave wall, and suddenly she looked exactly like the kind of woman who might know a thing or two about wizards.

"Alright," she said to the tree, nestling the burning flower down amid

its roots. "Here you go."

I helped her back into the chair and moved us off to a safer distance as the roots began to shift and shiver. Making a funnel of themselves, the roots sucked the flames up and into their trunk. It was about then that people started noticing us again.

"Now what?" I whispered, staring at the tree.

"Now what?" she laughed back.

I watched the tree, half-expecting blood or wizard-yoke to come bubbling out from its knotholes, but then the sound of sirens distracted me. Purple lights flashed over the bordering apartment buildings as coppers and firetrucks came bugling onto the scene.

The firefighters tried to get in, but there was nothing they could do. It was a private park, after all. Helpless, they gathered up with the cops around the garden's gate in a big hat-dotted bracelet.

The neighbors quickly realized what was happening, but none of them were willing to give up their keys. Instead they took to throwing great buckets of water out their windows toward the flames. When their arms got tired, they switched to using their showerheads and kitchen sink sprayers, aiming them out garden-ward till it looked like we were standing in the middle of an aquatic tickertape parade. But it was no use.

The tree had transformed into a roaring fist before us, billowing black and orange against a summer blue sky. A sound like thunder cracked down its center and I took Nana Ruth's hand without meaning to.

She squeezed my fingers so I would know she loved me. "Don't worry," she said. "I've got you now. You aren't alone anymore."