

Step 1: Buy a House

On cold nights like these, it helps to remember what's real.

There are three hundred twenty and a half tiles on the floor. I've counted, several times, when the only way I could live was to sit on a little wooden stool, moving it from room to room as if sitting long enough will teach me how to stand again.

There are five rooms in the apartment. The walls are white, clothed in a fresh layer of paint but bare, stripped of life, of love, of *him*.

There are pink post-its on the walls of the living room. Orange in the kitchen. Yellow in the bathroom. Blue in the dining room.

There are three hundred twenty and a half tiles on the floor.

When I'm not counting tiles, I stare at the walls, even though they're the same as always. No imperfections, no chips or cracks—nothing but those post-its covered in his handwriting, reminders that before I was here, he was. Before I sat in these rooms, he was here, dreaming up a future for us. *This is how psychological torture starts*, I think.

There are three hundred twenty and a half tiles on the floor.

Maybe, if I stare long enough, I'll find some indication that he's still here.

Step 2: Bring In the Furniture

It's not hard to choose the furniture—he's already done it for me, left descriptions of his imaginations.

A sofa for the living room—*like the couch I collapsed on the first time I stayed over at his dorm, on what would've been our disastrous first date had it not ended with the memory of his eyes before the alcohol stole my senses.*

Sydney Liu

A bookshelf in the corner, a dark mahogany one—*“How do you organize your books?”* he asked me, then looked at me like it was a personal offense when I said by color. *“But then you’d separate the series! What if they get lonely?”*

“You’re ridiculous,” I laughed, stealing another scoop of his lava cake. *“Okay then, what’s the proper way to organize books?”*

“By genre, obviously. And keep the series together.”

“You’re so wrong I don’t even have words for it.”

“It’s alright,” he says, watching me as if I have stars in my eyes. *“I’ll listen to you argue about your horrendous taste in book arrangements forever.”*

The bookshelf doesn’t take long to find, but ages until I have the strength to put it together.

Then, a rug, a paisley pattern he hates but knows I love. A lamp on the bedside table, placed at just the right angle so its glow reaches far enough to light my book during reading sessions in bed. A table there, chairs here, six around so we could fit my family and his. Sheer curtains for the living room, because he knows I like to watch the sunrise. I take the post-its down one by one as the apartment fills in, bits and pieces of him scattered around, until there’s only the one left on the wall across the entrance—*painting? portrait? to be decided...*—that I can’t bring myself to decipher just yet.

How is it possible I can feel every part of him stretching in the corners, and can’t feel him at all?

Close your eyes, love. Imagine me standing next to you. I’m right here.

I reach out my fingers and graze cold air.

Step 3: Find the Ghost

Days pass.

The furniture comes slowly, in boxes. First, a coffee table next to the sofa. Then, books from his old dorm that go into the bookshelf—signed copies of authors he loves, favorite editions displayed just right. A plant I nursed back to health after he forgot to water it for a week. Some throw pillows. A stand mixer, from our late-night cookie baking days before finals.

Weeks pass.

Cookies in a jar on the counter. Dishes in the sink. Laundry in baskets. A pile of clothes. A book lying open on the coffee table.

Weeks pass, and I don't dare open the fifth door.

I'd peeked into it when I first arrived, but there was nothing except for one post-it note—a green one this time, with two words: *drawing room?*

But today, with a mug of my favorite coffee blend in hand, I open the door to the room. It's in the same state I left it all those months ago—white walls, cold air. It washes over me, and even the gentle steam from my coffee doesn't seem to warm my hands.

Think, I tell myself. You're here. He's not here, but you are. He's not here he's not here he left me even though we said we'd love each other forever but he's gone how can he love me if he's gone—

There's an open paint bucket next to me—red—and I'm moving before I can stop myself, snatching it by the handle and throwing it against the wall, color splashing over perfect white like blood dripping in snow. I gasp for air and find pain lodged in my throat, a visceral heartbeat in my skin. I'm on the floor before I know it, the wood hard under my fingertips, paint seeping into my hair.

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Breathe, breathe, breathe, why can't I breathe, where am I where am I why did he leave me he said he'd love me forever why did he leave me—

“Why did you leave?” I whisper, reaching out to slip my fingers through ones that don’t exist, but I can almost feel his warmth bleeding through my body, the gentle caress of a hand on my cheek, the brush of lips on my temple. I think I’m drowning.

I think I’m dreaming.

I haven't left, love. I'm right here. Come find me.

Step 4: Make It Your Own

“So you’ve been hiding from me in here,” he says, and I whirl around, a splash of paint streaking across my canvas.

“Have you ever considered knocking?” I ask, listening to his footsteps approach as I attempt to fix the damage.

“Well yes—but there’s no fun in that, now is there?”

“Sorry if my definition of fun doesn’t include being frightened out of my skin.”

He laughs, vibrations rumbling through his chest. “I’m sorry, love. What are you painting?”

“It’s supposed to be you, you idiot. Well, not yet—it’s a work in progress. Not to mention you destroyed it,” I point out, the streak of paint fading but still evident. “Now you have a big slash over your face.”

“I happen to think scars suit me, don’t you?” He laughs again when I scowl, going back to working on the painting. “You’re a mastermind, my love,” he whispers. “I love watching you work. The way you capture life—it takes my breath away sometimes.”

Sydney Liu

“Stop trying to butter me up,” I say, failing to hide my smile.

“How can I,” he says, “when it’s the truth?”

The sun’s a little brighter as spring approaches, and for the first time in months, I crack the windows open, letting the air flow into the rooms. It’s almost easy now—living. I do a load of laundry, water the plants and straighten the books. Make my coffee with a splash of cream and a cube of sugar, and when I pass by the room, I only glance at it for a second before walking away.

But today must be different—maybe because the first flowers are blooming outside, or because a bird chirped this morning, or just because the windows catch the sunlight a little differently, because I turn back and twist the doorknob open.

The splatter of red greets me, but I step inside anyway, setting my coffee on the floor. My fingers trace the edges of the red, and it doesn’t feel like a gash, but a disappearing bruise, a fragile memory.

I open the closet, find that painting I made of him so long ago, with that faint slash over his face. *“Absolutely beautiful,”* he’d said when I showed him the finished product.

I hang it where that post-it used to be—*painting? portrait? to be decided...*—and when I step back, I feel at home.

I take out my art supplies—my easel, my paints, my canvases—and start slow. A box of strawberries at the supermarket. A bird in the tree, nipping at a growing bud. Clouds in the sky. I hang them in the halls, and each injects some life back into the house.

I remember, I want to tell him as I paint. I remember your eyes. I remember the curve of your lips. I remember the way you smiled, and your voice, and your face. I remember you.

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I know, love, he seems to say as I finish up the painting, the two of us sitting in a field of forever. *I'll remember you, too.*

Step 5: Live