

House of Shadows

A cold breeze rustles through my hair as I walk, dead autumn leaves crunching beneath my feet like bone. Light rain is beginning to fall, covering my black leather jacket in raindrops. Once I reach the end of the path, I see it—my childhood home. By some stroke of luck, the house has survived, though neglect has changed it. Dead flowers hang limp in their beds, their faces looking mournfully at the ground. I lift one up and its pale red petals disintegrate beneath my gentle touch. I step onto the porch. Grasping the old key tightly in my hand, I hesitate to unlock the door. I don't want to go inside, but I must.

Yes, this will hurt, but I don't want to forget them.

Inserting the key into the lock and twisting it, I open the door. Upon my entry, the musty scent of decay fills my nose. I cough. My presence has caused clumps of dust to fall from the family photos on the walls. I remove them from the walls and wipe off the dust with my sleeve, then hang them back up. I find a single photo in a small frame of my parents and place it inside my backpack. Something to remember them by.

I wander quietly through the entire house: living room, kitchen, basement, guest room—even my parents' bedroom. Still pristine, other than the dust and cobwebs. My heart squeezes in my chest from the eerie silence. I can feel unfriendly eyes on me; whether they are real or not, I am unsure. Now I must enter my bedroom. I'll admit, I'm scared to go inside. I have nothing but happy memories of this house, and every room I've entered has ruined those memories with their lifelessness. I understand the danger of being here. I've accepted the risk of returning to my childhood home. God, I wish I could stay here forever, but I can't. Climbing the stairs, I find a single piece of paper taped to the door. I begin to read, hands shaking:

Adrienne,

*We miss you so much, sweetheart. We hope you're doing okay. Be sure to take care of yourself.
Come back to us soon! We love you!*

- Mom

Before I can speak, tears spill down my face. All I wanted was to keep everyone safe. And now, everyone I love is dead because of me. How selfish could I be?! I abandoned all my friends and my family for a naive dream of heroism, and look what that's cost me! I sigh and fold up the note, dropping it in my backpack. I then push open the door to my bedroom.

You can't bring back the dead, Adrienne.

Upon entering, I collapse into sobs for the first time in nearly two decades. Nothing has changed, other than a complete lack of life. Layers of dust cover everything in the room: my bed, my desk, my mirror—even the windows. One empty green cat food bowl sits at the end of my bed. None of my plushies nor figurines have been moved. I spent my entire childhood here; so many years have been stolen from me. One grave mistake has cost me everything. I chased a dream of adventure, and now everyone I love, human and animal, is gone forever. Devastated by the sight of my room, I brush the dust off my covers and crawl into bed, looking wistfully out the window at the moon. Night has fallen now. Any paranoia I'd had before coming here fades as I begin to drift off. I've been gone so long, I've forgotten who I am. Only one thing is certain:

I am completely and hopelessly alone.