

Last October

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He's been her best friend for ten years. The timing was never right. Until now.

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The thing about coming home to Hartfield was that everyone knew you had, and they had opinions about it.

Bex Callaway had been in London for eight years, which was long enough that people back home had stopped saying *when you go back* and started saying *you're probably used to it there now*. She was used to it. She was also, in a way she hadn't anticipated, profoundly tired of it — the specific exhaustion of a city that required constant performance.

She came back in October because her mother needed help after surgery and because she could work remotely and because she told herself it was temporary.

Across the road from her mother's house lived Adam Fry, who had been her closest friend from age ten to age twenty-two and who she had then failed to adequately keep in touch with, which was a failure she'd always intended to address and hadn't.

He knocked on her mother's door three hours after she arrived, with soup.

"Your mum mentioned you were coming," he said.

She looked at him. He had the same face he'd always had, which was a simple and useful face — open, good, the kind that you could read without translation. He had, she noticed in the peripheral way that was apparently happening a lot today, grown into himself in the years since she'd last seen him properly.

"How much soup?" she asked.

"Enough for two," he said. "If you're not busy."

She was not busy. She held the door open.

He ran the hardware and outdoors store that his father had run before him. He was building a dry-stone wall in the back field — a project he'd been

working on for two years, unhurried, "because it's the sort of thing you get wrong if you rush it." He walked in the hills on Sundays. He read, specifically history. He had opinions about the management of the village's new planning policies that were well-reasoned and locally influential.

She had spent eight years in rooms full of people who talked very fast about very large things. Adam talked at normal speed about specific things and turned out to be considerably more interesting.

"You haven't changed," she said, at the end of the first evening.

"You have," he said. Not critically. Like information.

"Is that bad?"

"No," he said. "You seem tired."

She looked at her wine glass. "London is very loud."

"It is," he said. He'd visited twice. Both times he'd found it overwhelming in the specific way of someone who had made a considered decision to live somewhere quiet and was not regretting it. "Hartfield is very quiet."

"I'd forgotten," she said.

"You used to complain about that."

"I know." She looked out his kitchen window at the dark and the absence of streetlights. "I was wrong about it."

They fell back into the rhythm of friendship the way you fall back into a language you haven't spoken in years — imperfect at first, then suddenly fluent. He came for dinner twice a week. She walked with him on Sundays, which she had not done since she was twenty-two. Her mother recovered and stopped needing help and Bex did not book a train back to London.

She noticed this without fully addressing it.

She also noticed other things. The way he listened, which she'd always

known but had apparently forgotten. The specific quality of his attention, which was unrushed in the way of someone who had nowhere more important to be. The fact that she had been back for three weeks and had not once thought about her London life except to realise she didn't miss it.

The fact that she looked forward to his knock on the door in a way that was not entirely explicable by friendship.

"You're staying," her mother said, not a question, one evening in the fourth week.

"I'm working remotely," Bex said.

"I know. Are you staying?"

Bex looked out the window. The hardware store's lights were on. Adam usually worked late on Tuesdays.

"I don't know," she said.

"He's missed you," her mother said.

"Mum."

"I'm just saying."

"You're always just saying."

Her mother went back to her book, satisfied with the damage done.

It was a walk in the fifth week. The far hill, the one that looked back over the whole valley, the one they had stood on together at seventeen and twenty and made various declarations about their futures that had turned out to be partially true. October light, the specific late-afternoon gold of it, the kind you don't get in cities.

"Are you going back?" he asked, which was the question he hadn't asked.

"I don't know," she said, which was the honest answer.

He looked out over the valley. She looked at his profile and the way the light was on it.

"Bex," he said.

"Don't," she said. Not harshly. "Don't say something we can't unsay."

"I'm not planning to say anything complicated," he said. "I'm planning to say that you've been back for five weeks and I've been glad every single day, and I don't know how to say that without it being complicated."

She looked at the valley. The village below. The hardware store she could see from here.

"I used to stand here," she said, "when we were seventeen, and think that staying would mean I hadn't been brave enough."

"And now?"

"And now I think I was wrong about what bravery was."

He turned and looked at her. The October light.

"Adam," she said.

"Yes," he said, before she'd asked anything. Shorthand from twenty years of knowing each other.

She kissed him, which surprised exactly neither of them. He kissed her back with the particular warmth that was the quality of everything about him — unhurried, genuine, specifically Adam. She put her hands on his coat front and felt the solid realness of him.

"We're going to be very bad at this," she said.

"We're going to be very good at this," he said. "We've had twenty years of the groundwork."

She laughed, which she seemed to be doing more, in Hartfield. "That's a

very hardware-store way of thinking about love."

"It works for dry-stone walls," he said.

She kissed him again because he was right, as he usually was, in his particular quiet way.

They were not bad at it.

They were so thoroughly not bad at it that by the time she finally acknowledged she was staying — to herself, in writing, by not renewing her London lease — they were already three months in and she had opinions about the planning policies too and walked the hills on Sundays without thinking of it as a small-town thing and a large-city thing, just as the Sunday thing.

Her flat in London went to a twenty-six-year-old who wanted to be in rooms full of people talking fast. She wished them well.

The dry-stone wall was finished by November. Adam put the last stone on a Saturday morning and looked at it with the satisfaction of a man who had taken a long time with something and got it right.

She looked at the wall and then at him and thought that was a fair description of several things.

"Next project?" she said.

He looked at her. The October light — November now, but the same quality, the same gold.

"I'm looking at it," he said.

She took his hand, which was covered in stone dust, which was fine.

Below them: Hartfield, familiar and specific, entirely enough.
