

Nyctophilia

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(N) Love of darkness or night; finding relaxation or comfort in the darkness

IN CHINA, DURING the reign of Hizen-Feng, the concubines of the two previous emperors kept silk moths as pets. They liked to watch the moths mating. The game was to tear the moths apart as they were copulating and watch them bleed to death. They lived in the Palace of Benevolent Tranquillity. That image comes to me every night as I sit out on the terrace, looking down at the sunken garden, as the moths flutter by attracted by the lights and the strongly scented plants.

I wonder if that is what they had in mind when they planted this garden and chose only plants that are attractive at night. Scented plants whose fragrance is strongest and most delectable in the darkness like the Night Philox ‘midnight candy’ (*Zaluzianskya Capensis*), whose scent of honey, almonds and vanilla drifts on the breeze. When planting a night garden due care has to be taken not to pick scents that will overwhelm and clash. Flowers with light colours that reflect the moonlight. Moonflowers (*Datura Meteloides*), they open in the evening, closing their white petals when the sun rises and touches them. White Tussock (*Nassella Tenuissima*), a delicate, fine textured ornamental grass with silky thread-like leaves and flowers that shimmer silver in the moonlight.

A night garden’s beauty comes from not just finding flowers

that open at night or are fragrant in the dark but by finding plants that create interesting shadows in the early evening and later in the darkness. I studied the History of Gardens at University.

The scent from the plants mingles with the fragrance coming from my China rose tea. My sister bought it for me one day in Betty's. She thought I might find it soothing. I had not seen her for the longest time before that. We had fallen out and she had not been speaking to me. She rang and said she wanted it to be over. That she missed me.

I shuffle the polaroids in my hand like a deck of tarot cards. Old memories. I spread the polaroids out and rearrange them back into date order. Six in total. I set them out. In two rows of three like a collection of butterflies pinned down in a display. Do they kill them first? Or just pin them down with needles while the butterfly still tries to beat its wings to escape? Of course I know; you told me. *Killing jars sometimes damage the butterflies' wings; they panic and batter their wings against the sides. A better way is to kill them by hand, squeezing the thorax; it's a hard technique to get right so you have to practice on a few common moths first. Ones you are not planning to add to your collection.* You used to put them into frames, all neatly labelled, and display them behind your desk.

I moved into the house two weeks ago; there are still boxes waiting to be unpacked. I'm considering giving them away without opening them and starting again. I should have done it today but instead I fell asleep in the midmorning and woke before evening. "Won't you be lonely though, Rowan?" Maria, my girlfriend asked doubtfully when I told her I was moving out.

There is an unspoken question about how I have afforded the house. I tell other people I'm a professional gambler. I told Maria that I wanted to move back home to be closer to my family. She pretended to believe me but she would watch me out of the corner of her eye. When we first got together she used to ask me "Rowan, what are you plotting now?" I loved the way she used to say my name.

I liked the idea of a house when I first thought about it

but now I'm not so sure. Houses get filled with memories; they sink in through the plaster. You have to fill them with objects. Trinkets from holidays abroad. Shops have started to sell faux Victorian objects. Big glass cloches that belong in a lush hothouse or with little arrangements underneath them in a drawing room. Pictures with painted butterflies on in dark heritage colours. I looked for a long time at the globes. I spun one; idly I watched the tiny islands going round.

Simonides, the poet, used objects as a way to remember. He created memory palaces. You create a path in your mind of a room in your house that you know well and then assign things you want to remember to different objects within that room. Gamblers use a small circular garden instead of a house. The ever-changing randomness of the growing plants is meant to help them deal with the changing patterns and fortunes. It is meant to resemble a roulette wheel. I confess to never understanding that properly and suspecting that someone made it up. Do you think that you could use it to forget? I could leave the memories buried here. One of my last memories of you is when I was ten. My sister, Bracken would turn fourteen soon and my mother would decide that she was old enough to watch me during the summer holidays. You and mum broke up. I never knew why exactly. Mum said you had moved away for work.

My hatred of you was instinctive. It was primordial. I watched you through half closed eyes. If I was a cat, I would have been hissing and spitting, tail shaking, ready to pounce to defend my patch of hot sunlight. My body vibrated with it. My mother had made me come spend time with you. She could sense my dislike. I burned with it. The two of you were thinking of getting married and she thought she could mould us into one happy family. Bracken wasn't made to come. She was always better at hiding her emotions than me. I seethed with mine. We were in your garage. You had the garage door open to let in the air. The sun shone in my eyes, blinding me. I moved into the shadows at the edge where the light didn't reach me.

You were a Lepidopterist. Your ex-wife had made you keep

the paraphernalia connected to your hobby out here. She couldn't stand the thought of it being in the house and, even though, she had taken the children and left you some years ago, you never moved the stuff inside. You told me all this while you went about your business. In the corner was a freezer where you kept the butterflies that you had caught. *They have to be put in the freezer to kill off any parasites, otherwise they might destroy them.* In my mind you kept the freezer drawers carelessly filled with the bodies of butterflies, tumbling on top of each other and covered in ice. I should have known that you were much too meticulous to allow that kind of disorder. My eyes followed you as you walked over to the freezer. I held my breath as you opened the door and pulled open one of the drawers. Inside were clear plastic boxes neatly stacked one on top of each other. As you picked up one of the boxes, you dislodged something hidden in the back behind the boxes. I moved nearer to get a better look. It was the first time I had ever voluntarily come near you. I saw something all bound together with a rubber band. Playing cards? I thought, confused; why were you keeping a deck of cards in your freezer? In a quick motion you moved to block my view and tucked what I thought were playing cards back out of sight and slammed the door.

The butterflies that you had just gotten out needed to defrost before you could do anything with them, but you had got some other ones out earlier to show me what to do. You patiently explained what you were doing, talking more to yourself than to me. *If you can try to collect two of the same specimen then you can show the underside of the wings.* You carefully labelled them, writing the labels out in fountain pen, in an even copperplate, on slips of paper. The name of each insect, sex, age, date and place they were caught. You displayed them in groups by family. Two of each; one male, one female. High Brow Fritillary (*Argynnis Adippe*), family: Nymphalidae, Marsh Fritillary (*Euphydryas Aurinia*), Family: Nymphalidae. Large Cooper (*Lycaena Dispar*), Family: Lycaenidae, Large Blue (*Masculinea Arion*), Family: Lycaenidae. Swallowtail (*Papilio Machaon*), Family: Papilionidae. The Nymphalidae were your favourites. When you were

finished you closed the garage door leaving us hidden from view. *See there is nothing to be afraid of.*

Two white butterflies flew past me. It looked like they were dancing. I hoped that you would leave them alone. They were just Small White (*Pieris Rapae*), too common to be of interest to you. Bracken and I had got tired and fed up walking in the woods. You told us to wait in the clearing for you. It was one of the hottest days of summer. We had been bickering with each other as we trailed after you in the heat. This would be the first time I tried to talk to her about what you had done to us. What you were still doing to me. I was kicking at the sandy soil at the roots of the tree.

“Bracken” I said quietly dropping our argument, tears ran down my face. “Do you remember when I was little and... made us ... and he used to make you... ” I could never say your name. Bracken cut me off the way she would whenever I tried to talk to her about it over the years. The last time she would stop speaking to me for three years.

“Shut up!” She said, “Shut up! Rowan. I never did... there’s no way... you couldn’t remember that far back”.

Is that what you told her to get her to do it? That I was too little? That I wouldn’t be able to remember it? She must have known it was a lie. Or did you tell her that you would hurt me worse if she didn’t take part? Bracken would have believed that. She already knew how much you had hurt her.

“Brac... Brac...ken I can re...mem...ber,” I struggled to get the words out as I gasped for air.

Bracken left me. She walked off back towards the car. I carried on kicking the roots of the tree while I waited for you. You weren’t long. I felt your presence behind me before I saw you.

It was two hours later when we returned to the car and found Bracken waiting for you. I followed behind you, stumbling like a sleepwalker. Bracken wouldn’t meet my eyes. They were sore and red from crying. You bought me a lolly from the ice cream van. You told me that I deserved it for being a good girl and doing what I was told. You held it out to me. I didn’t want it. It made me start crying again. Bracken tried to hold

my hand. I flinched from her touch. I licked the lolly in the back of the car as I leaned my head against the window and watched the traffic. I still remember the taste of it. The way the citrus flavour hit the back of my glands making me screw up my face with the tang of it. The way it quenched my thirst and eased my sore throat. I offered it to Bracken. A peace offering. You hadn't bought one for her. She hadn't been a good girl.

I looked out from underneath the bed; my view was blocked by the white swirls of the bed end. I tried to watch the door but the sun was in my eyes making me see patterns and colours. The sun on the window reflected the shape of them on the floor. I wanted to move so that I was better hidden further under the bed. I felt sick and dizzy with the heat. My Mother's room was always the hottest in the house. It was airless today. She had left the window closed. I tried to turn my head to the other side to get it out of my eyes, resting my head on my folded arms. The heat of the sun burned the back of my neck. I felt like my insides were cooking. I turned back to face the door.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a caterpillar crawling slowly across the floor over the patches of sunlight. It reminded me of the caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland*. I was worried; someone should have found me by now. I was not well hidden. I watched the door handle move. It was ghostly, even though I knew that it was just someone on the other side. My heartbeat made my whole body pound with the same rhythm. The door opened and I saw white bare feet walking towards me with red painted nails. Bracken. I watched her bare legs walk round to other side of the bed. She opened the window and paused briefly to look out. Bracken turned round to face the bed. I saw her painted toes again. She watched the caterpillar making its slow crawl across the floor. Bracken lifted her bare foot up and brought it down onto the caterpillar, crushing it in between her toes. Bracken smeared its remains across the wooden floor. She left as quietly as she had come in. I often wondered after if you had sent her up on purpose, knowing that she would pretend not to be able to find me, knowing that if she could spare me that, she would. That she would try to protect me. It was late afternoon when I woke up. My mother found me. She was searching one last time

before she rang the police. I was known for hiding which was why they hadn't been too worried at first. My sister had sworn she had checked my mother's bedroom. She was such a truthful, reliable girl normally that no-one had thought to doubt her word. There was shouting and she cried. *See, there's no point hiding, you just get your sister into trouble and no-one will believe you if you tell.*

My phone rings; the ringtone reminds me of you. It is what I have been waiting for sitting in the half-light before dawn; the sky is a pale lilac colour. I check the caller ID. It's my mother.

"Rowan..." She's crying; her words are indistinct, "he's dead... Rowan... no-one had seen him... he hung himself".

I wonder who finally found you. Who cared enough about you to check on you? The last time I saw you, you were dangling from the end of a noose in your garage. I was fascinated by the way your smart, black dress shoes swayed slightly. I had come to retrieve something from you. I was surprised that you had left the garage door open.

I hang up on my mother and switch the phone to silent. Later I will tell her that I dropped the phone when my sleeping tablets started to work. She won't believe me. She knows I don't take the tablets. That I had them stock piled in the medicine cabinet in the flat Maria and I shared. Mum found out when Bracken used them to try to kill herself. She stole them from me when she dropped me back at home after we had spent the day together in York. She came in just for a minute to use the bathroom. I threw the rest of them away after that. Bracken's husband rang me a few times afterwards.

"Why did she do it? Did she seem different to you?" he whispered so that she couldn't hear him in the next room.

In the background I could hear the voices of their daughters.

"There were no signs; she's always so happy."

He's scared she'll do it again. What should I tell him? I'd not been close to Bracken for years. Not until that last time at Betty's. And all the time you were insinuating your way back in.

I didn't know you were back until I came back to visit Bracken at the hospital. I had not been back since I left for university. Bracken hadn't told me when she came to see me. Bracken refused to speak to me. She wouldn't even look at me.

I waited outside Bracken's room for Mum. I had come early to the hospital to see Bracken hoping to avoid anyone else. Mum was there though and she made me promise that I would go back with her for a visit. She had something to tell me.

We walked in through the kitchen door. You had your back to us, making tea, looking like you belonged there. Mum told me all about it as we sat around the kitchen table. That you had moved back to the area because of business. Yes, you were back in the same house. No, you'd never sold it. Just rented it out. I heard Maria's voice on the wind, "Rowan, what are you plotting now?"

I loved her for the way she said my name. I sat there across the table from you. Over the years I've learned how to keep a poker face. The memory of the polaroids you had taken of me and Bracken had haunted me all these years. What had you done with them? Kept them, or were they being traded like the way you traded rare butterflies with other collectors?

I broke into your garage that very night, waiting for the early hours when all is quiet and still. Inside I felt the same fear I had always felt. I still imagined that the butterflies were loose in the freezer, their bodies crisp and hard with the ice. I shone the torch on the freezer. It was in the same place where it had always been. You always were a creature of habit. I opened the freezer door and crouched down in front of it. I rummaged through the top drawer where I had seen you try to hide them all those years ago. It didn't take me long to find them hidden behind the boxes of butterflies. I sat back on my heels and took off the rubber band that held them together. I flicked through the photos quickly, trying not to dwell on the images, until I found the one I wanted. It was easy; you kept them all neatly filed in date order. It was one of me from when I was four. I left it on your workbench like a calling card.

It was a week before I rang you to arrange a meeting to tell you my demands. I used my mother's phone. Your relief when you thought there might be a way out. The hope that I would keep my word and not expose you, just take the money and run. Was there ever really a moment where you thought it would be enough? That money was all I really wanted? That I would just leave? Or was it just hope? When it dawned on

you that it was not going to happen, how did you feel? I try to picture your face. I would have liked to have seen it. The sense of defeat in your voice when I told you that I was going to take the photographs to the police.

Did you think that even your death would make me hold back at the end? Is that why you did it? I do think about it, just for a moment, as I look at the candle slowly burning out; I think about feeding the photographs to its fading light. I could sell the house and use the money to go travelling. I have such an urge to see the ocean, to feel warm salt water run down my back and to walk on sandy beaches. I could sort it out with Maria, see if she would come with me. Leave it all behind; wash up on some distant shore, re-born by the tides. We could walk together on the beach, hand in hand.

I look at the polaroids on the table in front of me one last time. When I went to your garage to get them I wasn't sure that you would have kept them. The ones of Bracken sickened me the most, even more than the ones of myself. I burned them because I couldn't bear to look at them. The things you made her do. All there, neatly labelled and categorised over the years, in the same copperplate handwriting: sex, age, date and place. It was like you collected your own evidence for me to use against you. I do think about destroying them for good. Maybe if Maria won't come away with me then Bracken would, just for a holiday. I could wait until after your funeral and then ask her. We could go wherever she wanted. We could sit on the beach and read magazines and she could tell me about her children. I would tell her about Maria, about how much I loved her and how my heart was broken. Bracken would give me advice. And Bracken would know that I forgive her. I imagine a nicer life myself. A fresh start by the sea. But I can only ever see it in darkness and for me the sea will always be black and the only sky I can see is the night sky.

The candle has burned itself out. It's morning. I get up and stretch. I'm stiff with being out in the cool air. The Moonflowers are closing as the light starts to touch their petals. Time to go inside and sleep. There is one last, lonely, moth hovering around the light by the door; they evolved to avoid predators.