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A Letter from an Old Friend

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Herbert Hallaway was a man whose every day of the last decade began exactly at dawn. As soon as the sun rose above the horizon, letting the first rays into his room, he would crawl out of bed, already well aware that he would not be able to sleep in. He would make his way into the kitchen to prepare a simple breakfast and a cup of coffee, later taking them into his office to enjoy as he worked on his latest novel.

Herbert Hallaway's morning routine was, in a way, a sacred ritual for the man; never to be disturbed or changed, it provided him with a deep sense of security, freeing him from unexpected happenings during the morning hours.

That is why, when he awoke to a pitch-black bedroom that morning, he immediately felt uneasy. He got out of the warm bedsheets, and upon entering the kitchen and glancing at the clock, he discovered that the sun would not yet brighten up the sky for nearly three hours.

Having shaken off the feeling of genuine confusion the abnormal awakening evoked, he prepared breakfast and coffee in an attempt to preserve what was left of his routine. Tapping his fingertips on the kitchen counter, he furrowed his brows and took a sip of the bitter beverage.

It was a cool, October morning when Herbert Hallaway's sacred ritual experienced its first ever disturbance; that very morning, the old doorbell outside of his house rang, startling him and sending a slight shiver down his spine.

As he slowly walked towards the front door to check who it was, Herbert found himself puzzled. He tried to think of one person who could possibly need something at this hour, and from *him* out of all people. He scarcely went out of his way to socialise with his neighbours, and the same could be said about them; however, he never complained about this silent agreement. Pretending that the strange Mr Hallaway simply did not exist benefited him as well.

He glanced through the peephole, only to see darkness on the other side of the door. Even more perplexed than before, he unlocked and opened the door. Not a soul in sight.

Just as he was about to shut the door, he noticed a lone envelope on his old doormat. Without hesitation, he picked it up and stepped back inside the house, locking the door behind him.

The envelope was completely blank – no address, no name, no stamp. He opened it and as he was taking out the sheet of paper hidden inside, Herbert Hallaway thought it was merely some kind of joke.

But then, he began to read the letter, handwritten in the painfully familiar cursive:

'Dear Bertie...'

'I'm Edward. Edward Fenmore.'

Herbert Hallaway looked up and locked eyes with the boy extending his hand towards him. He was not used to being spoken to by his classmates. He hesitantly shook the other's hand before replying:

'Herbert. Herbert Hallaway.'

Edward took the seat next to him and spoke up again:

'Did you know spiders have blue blood?'

'What?'

'Well, it's actually called hemolymph, not blood, but it does appear blue-ish.'

He seemed overly excited to share such a random piece of trivia at such a random time. Herbert was beginning to regret shaking his hand just moments before.

'I didn't know that.'

Edward opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by the teacher who had just entered the classroom, ready to start the lesson. So instead, he gave Herbert a gentle smile and turned his head to the board.

Herbert thought to himself back then, 'This is the last time I'm speaking to the guy.'

* * *

I'm sure that you remember our last meeting over a decade ago. That day, I made a decision which I still hate myself for making. I know that I hurt you deeply by burning bridges. I am truly, truly sorry for that. But please believe that it was the only way I could protect you.

Throughout our years spent together as best friends, you've always been the one to get me out of trouble; that day, all those years ago, I embarked on a journey that was bound to put me in grave danger, and if you followed and tried to help me, you would be in that same situation. I desperately wanted to make sure you wouldn't play with fire just to keep me company and risk your life trying to save me. But today, I must ask you for one last favour.

* * *

Herbert sighed, unsure of what to do next. Of course he remembered their last meeting. How could he forget how heartbroken he was when his first and closest friend decided to end their twenty-year-long friendship out of the blue? Could he ever forgive him?

* * *

They had gone for a stroll in the woods that day, taking advantage of the surprisingly sunny afternoon. Spending time together like this, conversing and exploring new places, used to be one of their favourite pastimes and they would go on those little adventures whenever they could.

Rarely was there tension between the two while they were out; Herbert could count the exceptions on the fingers of one hand. That day, however, he could feel something was off. Edward, usually full of energy, was looking down on the dirt path they were following; he seemed troubled.

'Eddie?' Herbert spoke up, trying to get his attention. Edward furrowed his brows, but stubbornly kept his eyes on the ground.

And so, Herbert stayed quiet too. He sensed that his friend needed to gather his thoughts and would talk to him whenever he felt ready. They continued walking, with the occasional crunching of the fallen leaves being the only sound to break the silence.

'I need to end our friendship,' Edward finally murmured. Herbert blinked, trying to comprehend what he had just heard.

'What?'

'I need to end our friendship,' his friend repeated. 'I know this is sudden, and random, and... I hate it as much as you probably do. But I'm doing it for your own safety.'

Herbert stopped walking. He looked at Edward, worry and despair flickering in his eyes.

'Why? What happened? Did I do something wrong?' he asked.

Edward stood right next to him and finally turned his head towards Herbert. His eyes were full of sadness and regret, but also determination.

'It's not you. It's me, I... don't want you to get hurt.' Edward sighed. 'Look, I can't explain why. I really can't, but the longer we stay together, the worse it'll get. So just... This is the end.'



Aleksandra Waliszewska

Herbert felt as though someone had just ripped his heart straight out of his chest; it was something he had never experienced before, not to this degree. He did not understand what caused Edward to suddenly want to end their friendship.

'I should go,' Edward moved away from him, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

'Wait, can we just talk about this? Is it because of that map we found last month? You can't just—'

'Nothing you say will change my mind,' Edward insisted, his voice trembling despite his efforts to remain calm. 'Goodbye, Bertie.'

And just like that, he turned around, leaving Herbert feeling confused, hurt and... betrayed. He watched as his best friend's silhouette moved further and further away from him.

'Eddie!' Herbert called suddenly. Edward flinched and stopped mid-step, but did not face him. Herbert took a deep breath. 'If you ever need me, you know where to find me.'

Edward stood still for a few more seconds before beginning to move again. He soon disappeared into the trees, leaving his former friend alone.

Herbert Hallaway had not cried in years. What he never expected was that a seemingly casual meeting with Edward Fenmore would break this long streak.

* * *

My fondness for plants has never been a secret; I've even named all of those I kept in my favourite place back home. Unfortunately, it seems that I forgot to find someone to tend to them during my time away. Could you please check up on them and take care of all ten? You can find them right next to Matilda's favourite spot.

* * *

Herbert threw on his coat in a rush, sloppily put on his boots, and nearly ran out of the house. He had told Edward he could count on him if he ever needed his help; it was not a matter of forgiving Edward for hurting him that day, but a matter of keeping his last promise. However, that was not all – it was not the promise that made him leave in such a hurry.

Edward Fenmore had *never* had a plant collection.

He had never owned a single one.

Herbert was quick to realise what was going on. Edward felt endangered enough to avoid writing in his usual direct manner. The instructions were meant for Herbert's eyes only as there was no other person who could possibly know what to do.

* * *

'I really don't know what you see in them.'

Edward turned his head towards his best friend.

'Come on, just look at her! You can't tell me she's not adorable.'

Herbert rolled his eyes and kneeled down next to him. Edward moved away the old books underneath the attic wardrobe, and gestured towards the narrow space. Herbert sighed and leaned over to take a look at Edward's object of admiration.

It was a giant house spider. Herbert straightened up.

'Having looked at her, I can definitely say she's not adorable.'

Edward glowered at him. Herbert glared right back at him, before asking:

'So... What's her name?'

Upon hearing the question, Edward's face lit up.

'Matilda! I don't really know why, it's just the first name that came to mind when I discovered her hiding spot. Now that I think about it, most of my spiders' names start with the letter 'M'. There's Margot, Michael, Madeline...'

As Edward rambled on and on, Herbert's smile grew larger and larger. He was not sure why, but listening to him speaking so passionately about spiders seemed to bring Herbert joy. And although he was not too fond of those arachnoids himself, he definitely did not mind listening to Edward for hours on end.

* * *

I'm sorry to put you in this situation, but I cannot take care of them myself right now. By the time you deal with the plants I'll have been long gone.

* * *

Edward's house was not that far away from Herbert's, as the two men had lived in the same town ever since they were born. Some thirty minutes after his departure, Herbert approached Edward's front door. The spare key was hidden underneath one of the rocks on the path leading to the fence gate. Its location had not changed in the last decade, which was undeniably convenient in that moment.

As he entered the house, he tried his absolute best not to look around too much in an effort to avoid evoking old memories. He knew he had to focus on getting to the attic as soon as possible.

However, even with his eyes locked on the floor, events of the past flooded his mind. It had been many years since their first meeting in secondary school, and yet he remembered them all. He had tried to forget countless times, but Edward had apparently carved himself into Herbert's memory.

He rushed towards the attic, as if he could simply run away from the echoes of the past. He climbed the ladder and found the trapdoor unlocked, so he crawled inside the darkened space.

He turned on the light and realised that the attic had not changed in the slightest since the last time he was there. At least the layout of old boxes and furniture had not; upon closer inspection, Herbert did notice a concerningly thick layer of dust covering nearly every visible object, as well as a plethora of cobwebs spread in all corners.

He quickly located the wardrobe underneath which Matilda once lived, kneeled down in front of it and leaned over to look for whatever Edward had hidden there. He immediately spotted an old, flat box. Without hesitation, he pulled it out and opened the lid.

It was a map.

The very same map they stumbled upon a month before Edward ended their friendship.

* * *

'Why did you want to go here again? We're in the middle of nowhere.'

The two men walked down the corridor of an abandoned house, their footsteps echoing through the long, empty passage. Edward looked at his companion.

'There's something hidden in here. At least that's what they say,' he replied.

'And who are *they*?' Herbert asked skeptically.

'Some people around town. I don't know all the details, but you know I had to check it out for myself.'

'I know. If you decided not to, I'd genuinely start wondering if someone replaced you overnight.'

Room after room, they explored the location; no place was left unchecked for the supposedly hidden object. Herbert could not help but worry; what could possibly be concealed in here, and, more importantly, *why*? However, he decided not to voice his concerns, and instead focus on Edward's excited rambling. He was far more enthusiastic about this expedition.

When the room they were in suddenly fell silent, Herbert knew that his friend had found something. He would not have stopped talking in any other case. Herbert quietly approached Edward and looked over his shoulder. The latter was reading an old, torn map.

'What's that?' Herbert inquired.

Edward sighed.

'I think it was a mistake to come here.' He gently hid the sheet of paper in his bag and stood up. 'Let's get out of here.'

He left the room, and Herbert followed him. Edward's energetic mood was gone; he was frowning, and he was *quiet*. And Edward was never quiet.

* * *

It pains me to say this, but this is the last time you ever hear from me. I've wronged far too many influential people who will stop at nothing to silence me. I'm begging you, don't go looking for me.

* * *

Herbert entered the garden in the backyard, holding the flat box in his arms. He put it on the ground and opened it again. He took the map in his hands and tore it into pieces.

But the map was not the only thing Edward had concealed in the box.

Underneath it, Herbert found seven pages of notes; Edward's handwriting could be seen on all of them. He had jotted down countless names.

Names of various well-known officials.

What followed each and every name was a string of numbers. And although Herbert could not decipher the meaning behind them, he had a feeling his ignorance was a good thing. Just as he did with the map, he tore the notes into pieces.

His vision became blurry when he glanced at the last item in the box. It was a photograph.

A photograph of Edward and him.

They had never really taken photos of themselves. They both knew they would most likely never look at those images again, so they preferred to focus on the present. That is precisely why Herbert stared at this one for what felt like hours.

It was – most likely – the only photograph of Edward and Herbert together.

Herbert took the letter he had received and read the last lines once more.

* * *

I don't have much time left, but I want you to remember one thing. I love you, Bertie, I always have. And although I regret leaving you that day, I do believe it was the only thing I could have done back then.

Thank you for being the best part of my life.

Stay safe,

Eddie

* * *

Herbert could not hold back tears anymore. He threw the torn up map and notes into a bucket he found in the garden, took a box of matches out of his pocket, lit one and set the papers on fire.

One map. Seven pages of notes. That's eight.

Herbert knew what he had to do. He knew what *Eddie* needed him to do.

He held the photograph close to his chest for a moment before throwing it into the bucket.

One map. Seven pages of notes. One photograph. That's nine.

Herbert looked at the letter and a sob escaped his throat. He crumpled it and hurled it into the burning pile of papers.

Finally, he had taken care of all ten.

* * *

Herbert Hallaway was a man who, however hard he tried, could not forget Edward Fenmore. Decades later, he still remembered the one dearest to him; the one he lost and could never bring back.

Edward Fenmore was finally free of the burden he had carried for years; however, Herbert Hallaway would have to carry one of his own – the burden of grief – until the day they would reunite in death.