

# Someone in a Reddish-Pink T-Shirt Walks Past the Window

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AVALON MOORE

I am in the house alone: wooden house, edge of the wide dark forest, fifteen minutes by car to any town.

The sun is high, and a breeze is rustling the curtains, most of which have been drawn against the heat of the light that pours in from the south in the afternoon. Beyond the closed curtains, past a stretch of grass: the woods, white pines and red spruce, a creek, distant swamp, a web of gently disorienting paths.

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What scares you about being alone in the woods?

I am asking you a question; I would like you to picture your answer. Right now, imagine: you are in a forest, afraid. Now tell me what shape the source of your fear takes.

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I had a partner who was once nearly killed by a bear. An unlikely encounter that happened to be caught on video, the black shape running silently at him from behind, hunting and hungry. Strange and improbable black bear behaviour, an incident that would have been dismissible as a possibility, except that it happened. I have lived in places where there are bears, but he is the only person I have ever known who has come close to being killed by one.

Just now when you pictured yourself alone in the woods, and you imagined being afraid, was it something like a bear that scared you? Or was it something else that you pictured?

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The curtains of the bay window on the other side of the room are open. This window faces east, onto a bush blooming with little pink trumpets that hummingbirds like to feed from. Beyond the bush, there is a dwindling path of gravel that marks the end of the driveway, and beyond the sparse gravel, a tangle of saplings, ferns and rowan trees. Someone in a reddish-pink T-shirt walks past the window.

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Another summer, I was living in this house alone when a manhunt was on for a man who stabbed a police officer in the neck in a town a few kilometres away and then fled into the surrounding woods.

In some areas people were ordered to stay inside with their doors locked. Everyone was told to watch for a man wearing black shorts, no shirt, no shoes. I stayed alone in the house and watched the edge of the forest through the windows, wondering what I would do if I caught sight of someone with no shirt and no shoes walking between the trees.

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Time freezes, expands. Someone walked past the window. Wearing a reddish-pink T-shirt. Coming from the direction of the woods. Going in the direction of the driveway, the front door.

Possibilities, a small collection of them, appear simultaneously and teeter together on a ledge in my brain (my right hand separates from the stillness of the rest of me, reaches for my phone lying on the table nearby, grips it): Sally, a friend's sister who has been staying with me, has gotten home early from her day trip into the city—Ron, the elderly man who does the yard work, has come by at an unusual time—there is a stranger walking around the house.

In the frozen blur of time's slowdown, my mind comes detached, drifts upward, wonders: is now the time that I have to move? Seconds (how many?) slide over me, immense as glaciers, creeping along on a thin

veneer of meltwater. My phone in my hand. Who, exactly, do I imagine should be called? And what should be said? To help with, or to prevent—what?

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Three months before the man stabbed the police officer and ran into the woods, there was a shooting massacre a couple of hours away. After violently assaulting his girlfriend, a man wearing a police uniform drove around in a cop car lighting fires and killing people. It went on through the night and into the morning, but people didn't know that it was happening; people were shot while carrying on with normal life, driving down the street on their way to work, going to get groceries, going for a walk.

In the weeks afterward, there was outrage over the fact that the police hadn't done enough to warn the public. A new emergency alert system was created: if someone heard shots fired and called 911, then all together, our phones would scream for us to duck and cover.

Then, the neighbourhood and surrounding areas around where the call was placed would be combed, and it seemed like every time, there was nothing to find. It would turn out to be a car backfiring, or someone with a toy, or nothing at all. Our fire alarm had failed us when the house was burning down, and now it was going off every time something was in the toaster. We were a population on edge, waiting for the next blow, certain that it was coming—and that this time, we would be ready.

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The front door, porch door, greenhouse door—they are all unlocked. Is the basement door unlocked? My ears strain to hear the creak of hinges. My phone, a solid shape in my hand. Time has become a void, I have fallen in, am disappearing.

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I had a nightmare a few years ago where I was wandering around the house that my grandmother lived in when I was little. By the time that I had this dream, she had lost most of her mind to Alzheimer's disease. She had always been an exaggerator, but in the years before her diagnosis the

stories became more and more amplified. It was as if her words could feel that their time was running out, that soon they would all be gone, and in their panic for survival they were working themselves into a desperate frenzy. If a stranger knocked on her door and her dog barked, a story would take root in the cracks of this experience and expand it until a gang of armed intruders were breaking windows to try to get in while her tiny Yorkshire terrier valiantly fought them off.

In the dream, I am walking through the high-ceilinged hall of her large stone house. There are wooden masks with anguished expressions peering from the walls, paintings with hidden dragons hung in every room, antique dolls with sinister expressions arranged on shelves.

There is a subtle feeling of dread in my body. I enter the bathroom, with its white tile floor, its highlights of faded pink and gold. I look into the mirror above the sink, and my reflection refuses to meet my gaze. The eyes in the mirror, which should be looking straight back at me, are sliding off to the side, with the same unsettling coyness of my grandmother's dolls.

A slow sense of horror seeps up into my body as I recognize that what I am experiencing is not possible. I stare at my evasive reflection, and it dawns on me that I have lost—or am in the process of losing—my mind.

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The front door will open now and Sally will come in, cheerful and concrete. Reality, which has slid sideways to itself, will suddenly shift back into place. I don't move. My breath comes very quietly. Who would I call, what would I tell them? The front door doesn't open. A reddish-pink T-shirt. Past the window, from left to right. From the side of the forest and the criss-crossing paths to the side of the driveway, the front door. It would take the police too long to get here. Too long for what? The reddish-pink of the T-shirt. The movement from left to right. I saw someone walk past the window. Did someone walk past the window? I haven't moved. I stand up.

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Once during a dinner with friends, those of us who had been raised as girls started to tell stories about the self-defence classes that all of us

had gone through at one point or another when we were kids or teens. We laughed about being made to scream as loud as we could, or going through role plays where we were trained to refuse to approach the other person no matter how they implored us (*please, my heart attack medicine is in my pocket, if you could just reach it for me—if I could please use your phone, it's an emergency*).

I remembered a high school gym class where all of the girls took turns facing off against a man wearing what looked like a bear-proof suit: thick, padded armour encasing his whole body, a metal mesh cage over his face. We lined up and, one at a time, we got a chance to be the victim. He would come at us and we would practise hitting and fighting him off with all our strength, trying as hard as we could to get away from him before he pinned us down.

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I am on my feet now, my phone in my hand. I make myself move, around the table, in the direction of the door. My mind, hovering above me, has divided into two halves: the half that knows that bad things rarely happen, and the half that knows the necessity of movement during the thick ambiguity of the moments just before a bad thing happens. I come to the front door. I make myself open it.

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A few years before she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, my grandmother and one of my uncles were out in the woods together at a family property. When I was little this uncle used to tell me vivid stories from Greek mythology; he spoke Italian, and painted huge, beautiful, brightly coloured canvases. Sometimes he drank and was exuberant and full of wild energy and fun. Other times, he drank and got a little strange and spoke too loudly, and reality would begin to slide sideways. The line between these versions wasn't always a clear one.

I wonder at what point on this particular day at the house in the woods my grandmother began to feel that the line between might be being crossed. Was there a precise moment in which it first occurred to her that something terrible might be about to happen?

This is where horror seeps in and comes alive: not in the instant when violence actually erupts, but in the ambiguity that spreads itself

over all of the moments where the violence either may, or may not be, about to happen. The moments in which reality splits itself neatly into two possibilities: the one in which you are overreacting, and the one in which you are underreacting.

The middle ground vanishes, and all you can do is teeter on a tightrope between the two extremes, waiting to find out which version of reality you belong to.

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A few days into the manhunt, a local newspaper interviewed the mother of the man on the run. She spoke with worry and tenderness, gently described experiences of racism and violence that he had been subject to at the hands of the police and the criminal justice system, and he shapeshifted in the collective imagination. It became easier to picture him alone in the woods, terrified. We began to admire his skill in remaining free, in sustaining himself in the forest. There was a change in the tone of the casual conversations that were happening as we waited to find out what would happen next.

In the article, it was said that he might be trying to get to Cape Breton, to the reserve where he grew up. I imagined him making his way there, smuggled from place to place by sympathetic strangers, hidden and cared for again and again, finding a way to get safe, to move beyond all of the things that had happened to him, to be given sanctuary. To be allowed the space to try to repair the holes that the pain digs through.

It faded in our collective memory that the reason why the police were called to the hotel in the first place was because of a report of domestic violence. This detail went out of focus, turned slippery and dismissible. As we watched his humanity take shape in our minds, it was so much easier to create a simple, clean outline of him if we let ourselves leave out the contradictions.

We wanted to feel an uncomplicated sympathy, so we allowed ourselves to forget that a human being is not one thing, but rather many things at once. That it's possible for one body to house all kinds of possibilities: to be worthy of compassion, and capable of violence, simultaneously.

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My uncle had a hole with ragged edges at the centre of him; this is where the pain dug its burrow. The pain would fill up the burrow and then spill over.

My grandmother managed to get back to her car. Later the x-rays would reveal fractures and bone chips floating free beneath the skin of her hand and her ankle. She drove to her youngest son's house, fifteen minutes away. The bruises bloomed across her body, the colour of plums. At the hospital, she told the doctor that she had taken a tumble off the front porch.

An understatement in the place of an exaggeration. Years later, after the Alzheimer's dug its holes through her and the words all slipped through, after her death while I was helping my mother pack her things into boxes, I found a transcript written out, where my mother had asked her to describe the details of what happened, in case she ever decided to press charges.

This description dug its own hole through me. I can't remember a single word.

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I move through the doorway, turning my head in each direction. I am alone. The world is green, and quiet; there is a slight breeze.

I lift my phone and dial my brother's number, press it to my ear. If he picks up, someone will know if something happens. What do I think might happen? The phone keeps ringing as I walk with slow deliberation away from the front door, around the side of the house.

I try to picture how this moment would feel if I were my brother, instead of myself—if all of my high school gym classes had been spent playing football or frisbee golf, rather than trying to wriggle out of the grasp of a man wearing a bear-proof suit. What would it be like, then, to be alone in a house on the edge of the woods, and to see someone walk past the window?

I move past the greenhouse, approaching the next corner. The call goes to voicemail. My hands are shaking. Dread seeps up from the ground, through the soles of my feet. I am alone at a house on the edge of the woods. What shape does the source of my fear take?

I try to conjure the kind of assumptions my brother would be making (a neighbour has wandered by, looking for a pet that got loose—someone was on a walk on the trails in the woods, and got lost).

I mentally arrange these assumptions into a tidy pile, label them *likely*. Nearby are two other, messier piles. It's hard to tell where one begins and the other ends, but there are two separate labels, in bold lettering: one is marked *unlikely*, and the other, *impossible*. When does a possibility deserve to be dismissed?

I turn the final corner of the house. My mind trips over the deep and shifting gap separating *unlikely* from *impossible*, gets lost in the space in between.