

Content Warning: Chronic Depression, Abuse, Emotional abuse, Alcohol and drug abuse

The Foundation of A House

Broken glass covered the floor, and when Amy looked just right, she could see the way the sun danced on the shards, the colours it sent shining in her vision. It was radiant in a way that seemed out of the norm for her life. For a moment she was utterly captivated by it, before she was floating away, the lights just small specks disintegrating onto the white walls.

The sound of cars, of men and women filtered through the open windows. The window was open, letting in the sound of jazz and the cool breeze of the dim night. Where the back was a landfill of her past, the front was of her dream. A main street where other houses sat just like hers, and new shops that were open after dark. She could imagine the Nash Touring's and the Falcon Knight roadsters that usually filled her street.

She wanted to dance, move her body like she used to. She felt like she could and for a second, she thought she was, until she looked down to see her feet moving off-rhythm. Bile filled her stomach, taking away the bitter taste of opium and the ash she felt on her tongue. She thought she was far too gone to feel anything, and yet, her heart compressed tightly like a wound-up clock, ticking in her ear as if it were too dangerous to go off.

Amy moved to the shadows of her balcony, stepping out of the flimsy screen door, smoking away on cocaine as she took in the small time of freedom she had. She faced the back of her lot, one that still had signs of the less privileged that had lived here before her. A square piece of land, close to an acre stood there wasting away into nothing.

It was a promised garden, Jack had told her. Boards dug into the wet soil, looking as if it were going to tip away any second. And beside it, sat a brown bench, placated for the other residents as a sign of the work never coming. It had been a year since and it seemed to be rotting,

cracks covered the surface as did the many prints of dirt and paint, surprising, considering that she had never seen anyone on the awful lot.

Across from her, on the other side of the lot, sat another three identical ones. Originality, she thought, was something she should have asked when she had married Jack. But now, here she was, placated into new restraints and she complied by it happily. How many other were like her, married and torn?

She took another drag, her chest heating up as she shivered at a sudden heavy breeze that had standing on the edge. Just like clockwork, the slow creak of the sign belonging to the shop that stood on her right between both streets, made its way towards her. It was an old place, one that along with the garden was on its way of being shut down. It was the yellow sign that stuck out into the air by a metal staff onto of the doorway that moved, letters that had slowly chipped away until all one could make was the 0 from the erased title, *1900's*. The store was two decades old and she wasn't sure if it would have survived another.

She took another drag and this time she held on to it long, unwilling to let the warmth that coursed through her to go too quickly. But eventually it did, and she was left with a lump in her throat that seemed to grow the longer she stared at the old, red bricked building and its unusual yellow sign. The windows had been all covered up with planks of wood and during times like these, she'd fool herself that she could see through the little cracks back into time, when she used to live in a building just like that.

But, now she stood on the backend of familiarity, unease crawling through up her throat the more she smoked. Everything insider the house was eccentric, furniture bough to impress and attract others like Jack. Those born with silver spoons and dainty shoes.

She wouldn't want to meet anyone like her anyway. Her heart was already reeling from the decisions she was forced to make and no matter how much she'd convince herself she did alright, the more she wondered the other side of it. She already took on enough risks through other men that embraced her body when her husband was gone, of drugs and spirits that filled her stomach instead of the food he bought her. She didn't have a single loyal bone in her body, that much was true, but love? That was different, an art that was built on the exercise of marriage, of vows and monogamy. She didn't trust herself, her lust and her body but her heart? That was given away to Jack a long time ago. She just wasn't a fool like everyone else to mix up the two.

She took a last drag, letting the cocaine settle into the bottom of her stomach where the smoke seemed to reach and grasp onto the small pockets of her heart. She felt as if she were going to be sick, but only for a moment and then she was back into the house, looking at the glass that winked back under the false lights.

Had she picked this house to only torture herself? The one thing Jack had allowed her to do because she was expected to live on her life here and it was bland much like the walls. She wasn't sure who she was anymore, taken by her husband so surely that she wondered if she had lost a piece of herself. But she would do it again in a heartbeat. Wasn't this the life that was chosen for her, of rugs and sunflower coloured chairs that filled this very room. She couldn't regret this. Misery always loved company.

She stayed put, weaning off the drugs with the continuance tik tok of the clock, hung on the far corner beside the radio, that seemed to appear bigger than before. She was entranced with the seconds hand, at the way it seemed to move as if it were escaping to no avail.

Her heart pulsed to its rhythm. *She was okay*, Amy reassured herself as she listened to it thundering in her ear. She had been lost in a world of time that had slowed down, only to have it speed up all at once.

What a pity, she wanted to cry, but her tongue felt too heavy and her eyes closed of their own accord.

She was too far gone to move and breathe and dance. It was just temporary, momentarily dimming her perfection. A moment to breathe. And soon, she too was consumed with the ticking of the clock as she let herself fall, wondering if she were to wake up.

The knock resonated in Amy's dreams, taking several tries before she came back to little sense. She leapt off the couch, putting her closest shawl on the glass pieces that littered the floor. She hesitated there, confused and disordered. For some reason she was sure they were important, but in the moment of haste and urgency, she lost her train of thought.

She was in a dire need of a drink, desperate. She glanced at the clock on the far corner, wondering if she had time considering the way her tongue felt so heavy. The knocking continued and she was suddenly awake and aware unlike before.

Her heart quickly leapt in her throat as she glanced at the sordid mirror that lay right next to the door. She looked shoddy, dressed in last night's evening dress, but surely, she could blame it on a headache, on a restless night of sleep.

No, she couldn't. She didn't dare.

She quickly changed into new clothes, ones appropriate of the time of day and brushed the top of her hair. She washed her face and applied some rouge, reddening her cheeks whilst deciding to apply some colour on her lips as well.

The air seemed thicker today, heat pouring off in waves from the open screen. She had forgotten to close it last night, but it did no harm. With it came the smell of fuel, of bread, of sewage. It smelled like the city. Like home. Once she was as best as she could be, she opened the door, heart in her throat.

“My hand is surely bruised,” the old woman cried shamelessly. She was dressed in nothing less than the finest of silk, a dress cut to the latest fashion, and in heels that pointed towards Amy. She was covered from head to toe and it was all tied together by the pearls that sat on the base of her neck, so large and poised.

“Sugar,” old woman Pearl lashed out harshly as she invaded the small space left between Amy and the door and squeezed her rather sizable figure through it. “I’m out of sugar. Victor and George wanted a cup of tea when they came over just a night ago, but I was not able to make any. The poor men.” She continued on, oblivious of Amy’s state.

When Pearl entered the room, her necklace seemed to garner all of Amy’s attention. It seemed too bright to see first thing in the morning. Amy tried not to stare at the sight.

“How are they?” She asked politely, donning on the smile Pearl seemed to like. She closed the door behind, trapping both of them in the sickly heat.

“That old fool, Victor hadn’t any manner. At the half stage after almost three years and he had the decency to ask why I wasn’t clothed in all black,” she prattled on. She set off to the screen window, struggling with the off handed hinges that squealed in protest as the clasp shut.

Amy went towards the sugar, putting it into a small container. Her mind screamed at her, at the deprivation of air and light. She was locked and trapped and she wasn’t sure if she was breathing anymore. “And those pearls?”

Old woman Pearl fanned her veined hand towards her neck, and much like a peacock would strut, took her time walking across from the screen to the kitchen. “A present from Victor. He had said Harry planned to buy them, for my namesake, but he had passed before he could.” She sniffled loudly, bringing up a handkerchief to clean her very dry eyes.

“Harry was a just and kind man,” Amy offered her the words the old woman would want to hear. Any other and she’d take offense. “How was George?”

“The lad grew up. Looks just like his uncle, has the same hair as Harry did,” she rumbled off, walked by and skimmed the counters with the tips of her fingers. “Very difficult to manage, I suppose. I told George as such. Gave him Harry’s gel.”

Amy glanced over quickly at the couch, where the shawl lay just in front of it, between the table and radio. She swallowed rather quickly only to cough at the dryness of her throat. “I’m not quite well, unfortunately,” she pushed the sugar onto the old woman’s hand, who made her way towards the entrance. “I’d like to take a quick nap and freshen up before Jack comes back from his business trip.”

“I remember when I was your age, Harry and I used to be quite passionate,” Pearl let out a sigh that would have made any other think she was reminiscing. “I wouldn’t want to keep you any longer from your husband. I’ll visit the both of you in the evening. I’ll even bring by the newest camcorder George had given me.”

“That sounds delightful.” Amy followed Pearl to the door, giving her no ounce of space to go through other than the open hall. “See you then.”

“Mark will be stopping by shortly,” was how Jack greeted Amy when she opened the door. She took his case and coat, hanging them neatly at their places before returning to the kitchen where she started a cup of tea.

“Will he be joining us for dinner?” she asked dutifully. She had spent the last two hours cleaning the mess she had made last night and had opened the window as soon as Pearl had left, letting the hot sickly heat back in the apartment.

Jack sent her an irreverent look at her question, as if she should know better by now. *Of course, his friend would want to eat here*, she was sure he was thinking. *At a house with a warm cooked meal made by the wife, instead of his lonesome single dinners.* But he didn’t say it. Instead, he gave her forehead a kiss and took his shoes off before sitting back on the sofa, as if she hadn’t ever spoken.

She flourished under his attention, at the imprint his lips left behind. His scent lingered in her space and she was elated that he was back from his business trip. The thought made her smile and face flush.

She wondered if she should tell him old woman Pearl was coming to join them, but she revelled in the thought of being the only one knowing and kept it to herself.

An hour later, Mark showed up.

Amy opened up a bottle of Gin and poured them drinks in their glass cups. It used to be a set of six. *What a pity*, she thought. *They were so beautiful.*

Pearl showed up the moment the men stepped out onto the balcony to smoke. Her knocks were deafening against the door, her own exclamation of her previous hand injury forgotten it seemed.

The old woman had changed outfits, from a day dress to an evening gown, a thing too formal and of a design a decade old. It seemed too heavy for the stifling heat, but the old woman wore it with enough confidence that it seemed almost adequate for the evening dinner.

“The camera,” Pearl raised her hand, one that held the small steel box, a dark gray colour that seemed too dull. “It’s the state of the art, George said. A Kodak brownie, I believe.”

Amy moved to the side to let the lady in, locking the door behind her. “I believe I heard of it on the radio. It’s said to be the most popular among the young masses,” she muttered in greeting, putting her smile into place.

Click. The camera was focused on her, the tell-tale sound of the shutter echoed in the room and just as quickly, Pearl had set it down and made her way towards the kitchen.

“The camera seems good to you,” Amy spoke, peaking into the oven to see whether the cheese had finished baking. Almost.

“I spent the better part of two nights taking shots of the streets,” she crooned, taking a seat on the round dinner table. “Be a dear and fetch some water for me. I do not do so well in heat. It’s stifling.” She took out an extravagant pocket fan, one covered by feathers that matched the green of her dress. “Harry had loved it, but with him gone, I’m left suffering.”

Amy gave her a glass, taking the seat across from her. She watched the pearl beads that seemed to move every time the old crone spoke. “I’d love to see what pictures you took.”

“Ah, I had them developed just earlier today.” Pearl poked in her purse, a tiny black thing before she pulled out a thick envelope.

Jack and Mark walked in just as Pearl opened the package and images scattered on the tabletop.

“Pearl,” Jack exclaimed, once he saw the old woman. “I trust you’ve been watching over my beautiful wife while I’ve been gone?”

His eyes quickly passed onto Amy, but she busied herself with the dinner. Now seeing as the cheese had bubbled a nice brown, she started preparing the plates.

“Of course. It seems the sun has done you some good!” Pearl stood up, extending her hand to Jack, however, she didn’t seem to get the kiss she was hoping for as Jack shook her hand only to drop it.

“Are you staying for dinner?” He asked, taking the attention of the room.

“Of course, if you’ll have me.”

“I wouldn’t dare to turn you away.”

Pearl let out a pitched laugh that seemed to echo in Amy’s head. Vaguely, she wondered if that was how she sounded, as if she were forced to put on such a display.

“Mark,” Pearl continued. “It’s great to see you doing well. You have any news for me?”

“Unfortunately, not,” the older gentleman spoke, placing a kiss on the hand she had extended towards him.

Amy was sure that Pearl had come to see him. The widow was dying for some sort of affection. But who was she to judge? That reflection came a moment later as another man’s cologne filled her nose. *Jack, Jack, Jack*, she reminded herself. She replayed his name like a mantra as if he’d have all the answers, even if he didn’t know what for.

“Soon, I hope.” She told him strictly, reminding him that she was getting too old to travel. “I’d like to see you happily wed before I join Harry.”

Jack moved towards the table as Amy tried moving the pictures towards the side, making room for the plates and glasses. And for the gin that she stared at a second too long before she put it in the center of the table.

“What a beautiful piece.” Jack held on to one picture taken from the height of the apartment. One could see the busy street below and of the evening activities that took place at the square. He handed it off to Mark before looking at another.

“Dinner’s ready,” Amy spoke out despite everyone already having taken their seats, scattering Pearl’s pictures once again across the table. She laid out their food and sat alongside them.

She watched the clock, mesmerized by the hands that went by and when it reached six, jazz flowed in through the open screen.

“Amy,” Jack called to her, as he poured himself a drink. “Close the screen, will you? I can’t take another moment of that awful music.”

“A downside of the city,” Mark buffed in. “The reason I got my apartment a little further away. Less noise and more of a well-bred community there.”

“The flappers, you mean?” Jack asked rhetorically, but Mark nodded anyway. “A pity, the women with their loose morals. Just because men had left for the war, they suddenly lost their way.”

“Have you seen the posters?” Pearl piped in, delicately cleaning her mouth with a blue handkerchief. “A pity what women will do now a days.”

As she and Mark continued, Jack sent Amy a look. She got up and mustered an apology as best as she could.

The music fluttered through her, her bones aching to join in, laying on her skin like pins and needles. She was lost and numb in time, the past seeming to wrap around her like shadows as she walked to the window.

Ash seemed to fill her tongue and rancid beer filled her nose. Her view seemed to tilt as the beautiful maple wood underneath her turned to rusted dark timber with newspapers thrown in almost every room. Hundreds of eyes watched her, looked at her barely clothed figure as she had them memorized. She couldn't see them, felt them and only heard the wild beat of her chest in her ears as she took in the lights that shone above her. It was her own stage and she breathed in the wilderness, the risk, the lust in the air that seemed to caress her skin like their own fingertips.

The music stopped so abruptly, it seemed to wake her a little as she made her way back to Jack and squeezed his hand as she sat down.

Love was all she needed. Surely, there was nothing better than this moment, she thought and shut the images that popped up, so vivid, much like the broken glass.

Her heart squeezed as Jack turned towards her. She anchored herself to the present, afraid if she lingered in her thoughts for too long, she'd go back in time, stranded and adrift. The haunt of something that could've been, of something better than the now she lived, trapped, and forgotten.

Jacks' attention was all it took to break her from the thoughts, from the doubts and she silently prayed for forgiveness. For having such thoughts of her husband could have been as dreadful of betraying their wedding vows.

Stay, stay, stay, she told herself. For better or worse.

“-Certainly.” Pearl spoke as she sipped her water, sweat clinging above her upper lip. “Whatever happened to the classics, to Mozart and Beethoven? Harry and I played symphony during our wedding.”

Amy smiled, all lips and no teeth. “We danced to Edward Ewald. A beautiful piece.” She turned to Jack. “Jack picked it out.”

“Her wedding gown sure took some by surprise,” Jack ribbed. “You could see more of her than the Church would’ve liked.”

Amy grew red at his words. That was her before she settled into her new role. When she was young and naïve, full of hot air, believing that she could have gone anywhere, made her name everywhere.

“Not at all like these flappers,” Mark mused, looking through the pictures. “They’d show off their bones if they could.”

“This age is going into shambles,” cried Pearls. “They’ll be burning in Hell, mark my words.”

“What a pity,” Jack responded. “It’ll be hard for Mark to find a decent wife.”

“Would you – Amy?” Mark frowned, one that sent his eyebrows down near his eyes and caused the lines in his upper brow. He picked up a photograph, one he squinted at momentarily before glancing back at her.

“She’s off limits,” joked Jack, taking the photograph that Mark handed him over the table.

Amy drank some water and then a little more when she felt the air suddenly get cooler. Dread filled her stomach much like the smoke of the streets had filled the apartment. The drink

in her hand was too light, and the liquid in her mouth went back too easy. She didn't want this. She wanted the burn, the light headiness, the laughter.

She swallowed harshly. She wanted her husband to look at her like other than how he was right now. "Jack?" her voice came out high and squeaky.

Jack threw his glass. It shattered against the far wall, but there was no light this time, no rainbows that streaked across the air. It was broken unlike the glass yesterday, with merit and outrage.

Then there were Pearls' shrieks as she made herself scurry.

Amy didn't see as much as she felt the hands on her shoulders, clutching tightly. She was in pain, she was sure of it but it didn't bother her. She barely felt it.

No, that was a lie.

It was the moment she looked at Jack's eyes and saw the betrayal, the hurt, the rightful anger he held to her so tightly, did she feel.

She fell willingly because there was a reason. She had done something so wrong, so aggrieved; she felt it in the way her bones bruised under his touch.

"Jack?" she whispered his name, looking behind him at Mark who stood now, his face stoic.

She wasn't sure what Jack saw that had him so mad. Her chest ached and she wanted to cuddle him close to her breast and reassure him until her Jack came back to her, loving and caring.

Jack had heard her. She knew it by the way his right hand left her forearm and crawled towards her mouth. He covered her mouth and nose and suddenly she was too lightheaded, too

far gone from the now that she was sure she could taste the gin at the back of throat clawing its way out.

Please, she wanted to say. No, not say, scream it until she was sure he could feel the weight of that word.

She wanted to glance at the photograph that Jack had dropped to the ground. But she couldn't move her head.

She loved him and that's why she didn't dare fight. They were volatile, like magnets always reaching for each other, always wanting each other. No matter what happened, they were true. Of that she was sure, and she'd bet her life if she could.

He'll let her go. He always did. He loved her, cared for her so much that he never left marks. A voice whispered in the back of her mind, telling her this was a trial. One made for their love, to test its boundaries and uncertainties; to see how far they'd stretch.

He let go and she fell, choking on air as she greedily took it in. Blackness crept across her vision, much like the dimming room as the sun set.

Then she saw the dotted picture.

It was of herself, smoking underneath the shelter of a company of the busy square. She was poised with a fitted dress, a glass forgotten on the high table next to her with lipstick marks, next to a man who was too close, too content to be only a friend.

She succumbed to the darkness as panic took over, but not before she was able to be clutch onto Jack, doing her hardest to not let go. She was his and he was hers.

Couldn't he see? She loved him; will love him till death do them part.

Please, she begged in her mind as she slipped into the embrace of cold cut darkness, soothing her. Perhaps she had been a fool.

Futile.

She was gone before she could move her cotton like tongue.