

P R E F A C E  
AN INTRODUCTION TO THIS PLACE

Welcome. Something you should know, before you go ahead, and before you leave this place.

The Visitor is a story delivered in four parts: *The Call*, *Fly Agaric*, *Perils and Pine*, and ending at *The Treeline*. At the entry to each of these four chapters, there is an audio file to accompany your reading. Time your reading with each song's duration. It is no small feat to structure a chapter to suit a pre-defined length, but such is my burden as your storyteller. Each chapter is annotated with the song's time-stamp—it is your challenge and your privilege to allow these minutes and seconds to guide your pace. Don't hasten through these four chapters; drink them in and time your conclusion with the song's close.

The next seventeen minutes of your life belong to these words and these sounds. You aren't slave to them – you're free to leave if you wish – but beware leaving a sacred space too soon. Even if you come back, it'll be a different place than the one you left. There are some moments in time that are finite in their infinity. Everything ends eventually, and yet, some things will never leave you.

01  
THE CALL  
03:59:02



She'd driven out of the city weeks ago, beneath a dim sky. She thought about that sky now, about the wordless music she'd played on that grey drive, and about how it was the last city-sky she would probably ever see. No, not probably. It was the last city-sky she would ever see. She didn't say many things aloud anymore (there was no one here to hear them), but she said that to herself now.

She sat before the frozen lake, alone. There was a cold wind accompanying the deep dusk that immediately followed the long-since-set sun—it was dark now. Dark enough that the sky still had more light than the trees did, although they were pitch black against its troubled clouds. They swayed gently on the other side of the water, as though they were imbued with their own life in this frigid place, but their movement was so far away from her that it only existed because, well, she knew that they *must* be swaying, thanks to the breeze.

It was cold. It was dark. It was lonely. As always.

And then there was his voice. It sounded like an echo on the wind. It was ethereal, its pronunciation was foreign, and it sounded borne of a breath that had no body. Could it be called a voice? She'd heard it before, but had no memory of it. She'd swear that it was a figment of her imagination, but she also would swear that she felt it within the breeze itself as it brushed her very skin. It spoke what sounded like words, but they had a disjointed quality... like someone reading the phonetic sounds of a language that they didn't speak, and therefore uttering words without actual meaning, but soaked with intent. Sometimes the sentences it uttered made no sense. She shivered in the dusk and pulled her scarf tighter.

This place was sacred for her. It was nothing more than a frozen lake near a small cottage that she owned, but this land had always been a refuge. During her separation, she'd spent an entire summer of weekends here. In the winter, she relished the cold just so she could light a small fire to stay warm by. And when she'd gotten the diagnosis, she walked straight out of her parents' comfortable home and drove straight here. That was almost a month ago, but it was long, long ago in her past. She hadn't worked in weeks.

The only constants were the rising of the weak sun, the dark trees against the lake sky, and his was-always-there voice. And the dull, throbbing pain within her head that told her that her



fleeting time was trickling through her fingers. All that was constant was the feeling of having to say goodbye every single day, until the word no longer had any meaning at all. It was everything, and it was nothing. Just like her, and her world—none of it would be here much longer.

The awful feeling of the last day of a vacation swept over her. Stars winked through the thinning clouds above, and she felt the utter lonesomeness that only a dark winter night could lend. And yet, he was here with her. Had he always been? As she got closer to what must be her end, she felt him more and more. But it wasn't exactly a presence that she could define... he wasn't like a friend that stopped by for tea every few days; he was more a touch, a feel. Not a "presence", not a word that made him seem ghostly or vague, but an invisible friend who communicated with emotions, with sensations, and with the way that he listened.

He didn't exist. And yet, here he was.

Or was he a product of the thing, the horrible evil twin; the tumor that sat in her brain as she thought in the dark? He didn't feel like a hallucination... yet he definitely felt stronger and more real with each day. She believed in him, whatever he was – this being of voice without language and feelings without a heart – and she felt his attention turning more to her all the time.

He was all that she had here, along the treeline. The voice, and the dark, and the end that drew near.

She took a breath of frozen air and straightened out her protesting limbs. She rose from her sitting place, she wiped her nose, and she walked up to the dirt road, crossing it and once more entering into the warm glow of her refuge. Alone, but not solitary.

02  
FLY AGARIC  
03:34:05



He watched her rise from the shore. He held her there, and he watched her rise again. She wiped her nose, and she walked up the hill to the road. He went back to watch her rise again, and, in an instant's thought, he wondered why he enjoyed watching her. She'd never seen him, never made any intimation that she even knew he was there—as far as her senses went, he wasn't. But he knew she felt him, from time to time, and that gave him a curious sensation.

He stretched his ethereal body across the day, and watched her lie in bed. Watched her wait for her coffee to steep. Watched her rise from the lake's edge again. She had a grace in her slow, sad movements. She had a complete lack of wastefulness. She seemed to have a purpose, and he wondered if she was his.

He had only recently come to this place. In his peoples' definition (if you could call them that), he arrived a moment ago, and he arrived a millennia ago. They were special beings, able to move effortlessly through time, or rather, reside in various points of time all at once—or navigate from one to another in an instant. Step forward into the future, or backward into the past. Or sideways to billions of years away. Given the ability to see and experience everything simultaneously and repeatedly, his race no longer had much curiosity in their nature. Not really. He could learn a new science in a second, for example, just by flashing forward to a point where he already knew it. Never be late; just by stepping to an earlier point when he was on time. Nothing was out of reach. The very notion that something could be tantalizing to his kind just didn't exist. He'd always been resentful of that fact. He knew what a "tease" was. A tease might be nice.

But then he found her. And her small woodland life, which she only lived for days at a time. Mere blinks, in the grand scheme of eternity; but immeasurably meaningful highlights of her own existence. And it sparked something in him. He was intrigued. And, soon enough, immediately, a lifetime ago; he started talking to her.

It started slowly, at first. He wasn't even sure how he was doing it – his race didn't have a mouth or lungs or even the ability to shape air into sound – but he'd gone to a place inside himself where he found he was able to communicate with her. And he knew that she was hearing him. But he also knew that she doubted her senses. She didn't understand them, and

she dismissed his contact as something she couldn't comprehend. And that was fine with him; he enjoyed watching her sit. Watching her wait. Watching her sing, and walk, and put pieces of wood in her stove.

He watched her rise from the lake once again. He could tell she was lost within herself, and he could see what was troubling her, even though no one else could. He could see it growing in her skull just as easily as he could see her eyes fill with stars and night sky every evening. This clump in her head, this tumor; it's what brought her out to her cabin for the remainder of her life. And it's what brought her to the dark trees every night.

She crossed to her driveway. He watched her walk away, and stepped back to watch her walk away again.

He'd never watched anyone like this before. It's possible that none of his kind ever had. Although, for beings who live an eternity in every moment, it was pretty hard to believe he was the first. He'd put a lot of thought into it, and he concluded that it didn't matter if *everyone* was watching *everyone else all the time*—no one else was him, and no one else was her. And he enjoyed her.

He'd only recently come to this place, and now he wasn't so sure he could leave. She was all that he had here.

He could watch her childhood, her first love, and her last day of work. Once he starting truly seeing her, he'd always been with her. She was never alone.

03  
PERILS AND PINE  
03:53:38



She glanced at herself in the mirror (not something she did often these days), and saw her skin sagging from her face, grey and ashen and tired. She touched her cheek and pursed her lips. She was far too young to have fallen so far, she thought. She tried to take a deep breath and nearly lost her vision for a moment because of it. Things were unravelling faster all the time now, it seemed. She sighed weakly. If she was going to live what she knew would be her last days, she was thankful to be able to live them here. Alone.

But his voice had been getting louder. Less breathy, and more practiced. He'd begun to sound angry, as though trying to argue with fate itself. His words were just out of reach, still, but he was clearly bargaining and more focused. He'd begun to scare her, in her quieter moments. Not that she was afraid of him, but of his temper and whatever he was aiming it at. There was an intensity, a desperation, that hadn't been there before. She felt it now, and she knew she'd never felt it before... yet as she looked back upon her life, it was the same anger that he'd always had. He'd changed, but had always been this way.

Through the weak sunlight of the afternoon, she could see the treeline along the lake, across the dirt road. She knew she'd meet the dusk there again tonight. As she did every night. It's the life she wanted to live, day after day, until she had no more life left. Not in a defeated, morbid way; but in an intentional determination. She'd meet her fate somewhere along that very treeline. She was certain.

She was knitting these days. Doing crossword puzzles. And she'd begun devoting herself to meditation; appreciating all the sounds and sensations of her solitary home. It was intended to be peaceful, but meditation came with it a frightening loudness. She sat in silence for a couple of hours every day, thinking carefully about the past moments of her life, her near future, and this exact moment of the present. She also made an effort to dig deeper into herself, and to re-learn things she'd already forgotten. Teaching herself to feel boredom again, to (try to) breathe and to feel gratitude for it, and to listen to the spaces between silence.

And that was how she'd learned to hear his words. His voice reached out across her childhood and touched her now, in her near-death state. The intensity was almost always too much, and she shrunk away from it, frightened. He wasn't loud, or violent; but desperate and

frustrated, and always so intense. As though he wasn't communicating with the volume of his voice, but with the volume of his emotions. It was very hard not to back away from.

He sounded hopeful, as though reassuring her. Reassuring her of her nearing fate? Of her short time remaining? She couldn't be sure. Maybe that was a part of his message, but that didn't seem right for him. There was a sadness in his tone too, as though he knew he'd have to trade something for whatever he was bargaining for.

His words were deafening. There were tears forming in her eyes. She found that she heard him better if she ignored her ears.

She opened her eyes but stayed focused on the sensation, the sensation that was uniquely him. She could feel it; she was closer to him than ever before. An unearthly barrier had melted away, a connection was within reach. She seemed to be within the frequency of his words, and she held her breath and gazed, eyes unfocused, past the moment. As she watched the blurry shapes of the bare trees pitch gently in the wind, she heard – she finally *heard* – a clear sentence in his raspy voice:

“You rise, and I'll step aside.”

He knew – he finally *knew* – she'd heard him. She didn't comprehend that his time, his eternal time, his never-beginning and never-ending, was in jeopardy, but he imagined she'd felt that too. He'd made a choice, made it earlier that day and made it when she was born, and he'd face a consequence for it. He'd decided. It made him angry and accepting all at once, but it was the only choice. He'd do it for her.

04  
THE TREELINE  
04:23:07



The sky's final light went out. No stars were present. They might not come at all tonight. Something fateful was about to happen. Had already happened. She held her breath and looked out at the dark trees with more fear in her than she'd ever had. This felt like an end. She could hear his voice anytime that she wanted to cue into it now, but she could keep it away too. She wasn't sure which she preferred. But there were times, like tonight, that he spoke so immensely loud whether she wanted to hear him or not. It sounded like he was hard at work casting a complicated and fiercely desperate spell.

He spoke in the only way he could, and his frustration and determination dripped from every word. He watched her sit on the rock, watched her walk to the rock, and watched her sit again. He had a noble intent, and with that came a noble sacrifice. But he couldn't deny it anymore: he'd grown to care deeply for her. His kind didn't have an end, and therefore they didn't procreate the way that hers did—but he felt a kinship, and an interest, and an affection for her. What he was about to do was simple enough, but the intrusion on her life was unfair in every sense of the word. He wouldn't affect her again, after tonight. As such, he drank in every one of her movements, and appreciated her slowness. Her trepidation, her fear. She felt it, which means she could now remember feeling it for her whole life. She wouldn't feel it for much longer.

The very air shuddered with the intensity of his voice, and she shivered because of it. Her instinct was to pull her winter wear tighter, but she knew the cold she was feeling was not coming from without. She braced herself – her very existence – for whatever was about to come. This must be what it feels like to die, she thought; surrounded by darkness and cold and unwaveringly deafening sound. She was afraid, and began to cry.

He thought about the path that brought him here. He thought about what lay ahead. He felt a bittersweet emotion. He was faced with an entirely new concept now, and it made him deeply uncomfortable. Here was the idea that he'd have to leave something behind. It was nothing he'd ever known. He hated that. And he loved it here. She was his solace. She was what pushed him forward. It was time.

She felt the air begin to pulse unnaturally around her. She felt nervous and panicked, she couldn't shake this overwhelming, undeniable feeling that something was at an end and something else about to begin. She was breathing quickly – she couldn't help it – and she felt blinding pain from the effort. She felt dizzy, and clutched her spinning head with both of her hands. Tears flowed from her eyes freely.

He was close now.

She was screwing her face up with the effort of enduring this onslaught. Would it pass? Was it somehow becoming even more intense?

He reached out.

She saw a long, shimmering ripple in the night air, hovering inches above the water. It looked as though it were mere feet away, but it also reached back in space to the line of trees at the frozen lake's opposite shore. It throbbed, and flickered in and out of her vision. His voice was turbulent and drowned her completely.

He touched her.

Her vision burst into light in this cold, dark place. She only felt pain for an instant, but in that instant were years of suffering. She couldn't draw breath – she was utterly immobilized – but it began and ended within a fraction of a second that seemed to stretch onward.

With the gentlest touch, he brought her tumor through time with him, far forward, and he left her far behind. He brought it with him across the span of ages, pushing it to a place where it had already dissolved into nothingness and left her where she belonged. He brought the worst part of her ahead, and left everything else behind. Like a streak, he surged forward and left her forever. He had no word for goodbye.

It was morning. She was seated on her usual lakeside rock, and heard only the warbling of springtime birds and the rustling of the bare trees, reaching upward into the dazzling sunlit blue sky. She took a deep breath, held it gratefully, and enjoyed the fresh morning air. Soon she'd rise, walk across the road to her cabin, and resume her knitting.