

Comforted By Delusion – Annabel, Year 9, NSW

Content Warning: References to suicide.

I feel the sting of a solitary tear begin to build and descend down my weary face. The full realisation of what I've just said and done is dawning upon me.

I move as if in slow motion to collect the familiar ingredients in which to make a soothing brew. I was most comfortable in the kitchen. It was where I was first taken after he had swept me off the street and into this beautiful home.

What a charming soul he is.

No. I must not dwell on him any longer.

Unhurriedly, I proceeded to the dusty, cobwebbed shelf to accumulate herbs. How could I have been so foolish with my feelings? Maybe it was due to my harsh and unmerciful childhood. I had never known love before he found me. I grew up in an orphanage, where every child is just a number, treated the same way. Treated badly. I hated the feeling of being lonely despite always being surrounded by people. I took to the streets, purely so that I could get away from the cruelty, only to find that my new life would be even crueller, begging for scraps & trying to survive.

It was only when *he* took pity on me (although I was sure it was more than that) and offered me a role in the kitchen of his estate, that my life finally had some meaning, some joy. And so my affections grew. Although he had a wife, I never saw signs of a genuine relationship, and I refused to believe their connection was substantial.

I contemplated all this now, as I combined the herbs with boiling water and began to stir. As if reflecting my mood, the clouds outside darkened, increasing my sense of hopelessness.

Ever since I was invited in, I could see *him* showing small glimpses of affection that I was sure were signs of his growing endearment towards me. It was in the small gestures, the way that he gave me the morning off when I was ill, the way he said '*thank you, dear child,*' when I brought him his morning coffee. I mean, he said *dear* for heaven's sake!

No one had ever described me as dear before.

Come to think of it, no one ever referred to me at all. I stared out into the vast grounds, the sheer size further highlighting my insignificance in this home and this world.

And yet, just yesterday, I felt as high as the birds circling the desolate winter sky. It was the moment that left no doubt. I was hurrying down the stairs on my return to the kitchen when a spell of dizziness overcame me. I collapsed on the grand staircase, and there I would have remained if it were not for *him* (who had just happened to be in the room) striding across the floor to me. I will never forget the powerful and confident way he gathered me in his arms and placed me on that chair in the entrance hall.

By this morning, I could bear the tension no longer. I had brought out breakfast to see him dining alone. Opportunity had presented itself.

“How are you feeling this morning,” he said in a soft tone. My emotions suddenly burst forth like floodgates opening.

“I know you feel this too. There is no denying the connection we have. Now is the time to declare our love for each other for the world to see. I know you love me too.”

As I let these words out, I could see his face morph into what only can be described as horror. I gradually adopted that same face as I realised The Wife was standing in the doorway.

“*Him?! In love with you!?* What a foolish child you are. We always knew you were damaged, but I never knew you were this deluded too.” Her shrill laugh echoed through the hall.

“Now now Edith, show some compassion. She is but a simple child comforted by her delusions.”

With those words, I could see that it was pity, not love radiating from his eyes. I felt my heart shatter into more pieces than there are stars in the sky.

“He merely shows you kindness, and you mistake it for love?” she said.

It wasn't the ridicule that broke me, but the rejection written all over his face. I slipped away, feeling as invisible as I did on the streets. I couldn't bear to return to those feelings of loneliness and despair. I found myself in the kitchen, and the solution came to me, seeming inevitable.

As I now give my ingredients a final stir, a sense of calm washes over me. At least there was one useful lesson taken with me from the streets - the dark power of herbs.

As I lift the cup to my lips, I am reassured by the knowledge that this fatal concoction will swiftly and quietly remove me from this world and the pain I have known.

Oblivion welcomes me.