

It would have been rather poetic had Freddie made his return to the home that embodied his childhood ten years to years to the day of his departure, but he had to make do with arriving a few weeks earlier than that particular anniversary. It was still summer however, as it had been when he, his parents, and brother had crammed their possessions into their car and set off for a new chapter in their lives in another city in the far distant reaches of the other side of the country.

Rather than shimmering brightly at the height of its daily parabola the sun was nearing the completion of its descent towards the horizon, radiating not brilliant shards of golden light upon the families either delighting in the warmth it showered on them or those more temperate souls who sought shade from something they considered three months of annual torture but deep orange beams that cast long shadows wherever it caught an object of substance, heralding the end of the day for the young'uns and the beginning of evening festivities for everyone else. While it was by no means dark yet, those whose vision had dimmed either from time's ravages or the cruel hand of fate had begun to illuminate their artificial suns that provided their masters and mistresses with anything from a warm, yellow glow to a stark, bluish shard that pierced the retinas of anyone so unwise as to even glance in the direction of its origin. Whatever their colour, these bulbs cast rectangles of luminosity onto the ground outside which would only grow more vivid as night fell in earnest.

Other illuminations were beginning to spark into life to counter the impending darkness, such as the headlights of vehicles beetling around the streets of the town in their efforts to ferry their occupants to their destinations. Many were returning from a day spent basking on the golden sands of the beach that separated civilisation from the glittering, horseshoe-shaped bay while other, less fortunate souls were hurrying home to enjoy what little time they had away from the daily drudgery.

One particular set lit the path ahead for a dark blue sedan, second-hand as any thrifty vehicle purchase should be, yet its age could still be easily counted on the fingers of one hand: the perfect balance to give an impression of wealth, success, and status while maintaining an air of moderation and mindfulness. The streets around which it was navigating were unfamiliar to it, but its navigator would never have been able to forget them after spending such a large part of his life following their asphalt and concrete corridors; even the backs of his hands held more secrets than the layout of this neighbourhood. So confident was Freddie in his ability to follow his nose back to his childhood haunts, he felt perfectly at his ease in casting an eye about for any changes that had wrought themselves on such a familiar landscape during his absence. Unsurprisingly, the roads on which he was travelling had been resealed and several houses had been given the benefit of a lick or two of paint to spruce up their façades but he did see a few new developments, the most notable of which was the new corner store which had taken up residence just a few blocks away from where he would be living for the foreseeable future; he would have to remember that.

On, off. On, off. The fox's features were momentarily illuminated with a greenish glow as if he were aboard an alien spacecraft, about to be probed by some bizarre, pulsating medical instrument; thankfully, the flashing light on his dashboard was nothing quite that sinister. Once the beat-up old truck, whose paintjob was indistinguishable from the extensive rust covering much of the exterior, had passed by, Freddie was able to turn into the driveway that had once been his parents', that he could now claim as his own.

Speaking of the driveway, it seemed that it had been sealed during his absence: gone was the basic dirt and gravel pathway that lead up to the front of the house, forming a barrier between the fence on its righthand side and the small expanse of now-patchy grass which his parents' last set of tenants had clearly failed to take care of sufficiently. In its place was a stretch of asphalt which had lightened from the original rich, dark grey hue it no doubt sported when it had been laid a few years

before. As he brought his car to a halt beneath the window he knew to look out from the living room there as a disappointing lack of crunching beneath his tyres; re-paving the driveway seemed a little too excessive an idea just to achieve such a minor pleasure in life.

Out he got, the boot popping open with one pull of a lever. It was a pity his second childhood would have to begin with something so laborious as hefting luggage from the back of his car, into the house, then the tedious task of unpacking and finding somewhere for everything to go. Perhaps that could take place of the course of a few days, there was no rush to settle in after all. With a small grunt of effort Freddie hefted two of the holdalls he'd squeezed his belongings into a long decade ago out of the back, one clutched in each small, slender hand.

The interior of the house was very familiar to the fox. There were some imperfections in the paintwork he didn't remember being there when he left and some of the furniture had been replaced or moved around, but the feel of the place was the same. He filled his lungs with nostalgia, tiny specks of dust dancing through a shaft of evening sun on their way to his nostrils, and the memories flooded back to him. With a smile that could not have looked more contented, he struck out towards the stairs: the bags he carried contained personal effects which could go nowhere but the master bedroom he planned to claim, bequeathed to him by his parents.

With the bags deposited on the bare mattress, it was time for any thoughts of unpacking to take a figurative backseat: the drive had been a long one and certain necessities had been put on hold for its duration. A zip, a little moan of relief, a splash, and a hiss, Freddie found himself stood before the bathroom vanity unit; even washing his hands seemed to bring back memories. As he dried his hands on the fabric of his shorts (the previous occupants had taken even their most ragged towels with them), his eyes flicked towards the mirror behind the basin. For the first time since his arrival his smile took on a slightly rueful edge. His features had matured over the past ten years: his jaw had become more chiselled, his reddish-orange fur – while still soft - had become coarser, and the smallest hint of crow's feet had manifested themselves at the corners of those same golden eyes. He liked all this about his appearance, yet he found himself gazing at the same small scratch in the glass he had done all those years ago: it hadn't moved any higher in the intervening years, and neither had his eye-level.

Unbeknownst to Freddie, he was being observed as he returned to the car for another load of luggage: if he were to glance in the right direction, he may just have been able to catch the smallest glint of blue peering out from behind a mid-grey curtain on the upper storey of the neighbouring house. It gave him a good, long look, flickering over every inch of his body it could see. The pupil had dilated, pushing azure aside to drink in more of the sight that was clearly having a profound effect on its owner. However, the moment he stepped back across the threshold of his front door, the eye vanished.

The fox's feet, suitably small, carried him down the hall to where he remembered the kitchen being, a few of the floorboards greeting him in their own jovial fashion as he passed. Like the rest of the house he'd seen thus far, Freddie could detect little change in the kitchen as the same units, flooring, and appliances presented themselves. The fridge gurgled a hello to him as he trod past, hefting the box in his arms onto the counter top with a *huff* of effort, raising himself onto his toes just a touch so the cardboard could clear the lip of the laminate surface. Pulling the flaps of its lid aside, he peered in at the contents: a jumble of various plates, bowls, mugs, and the like sat expectantly, clamouring to be delivered to their assigned shelves and drawers.

As Freddie stretched onto his toes to slide the first of several wine glasses which, like him, had come full-circle, a thud completely unrelated to his efforts met his ears from somewhere behind him. Before he could turn around to examine the source however, an arm appeared suddenly above his head and plucked the glass from his hand.

“Let me do that for ya,” an unquestionably feminine voice said from above his head as the glass was placed easily upon the shelf he had been reaching for. Having jumped at the first glimpse of his assistant, stumbling to one side, the fox looked up at the owner of both the arm and the voice. As he’d suspected, he had been joined by a young woman, probably around the age of twenty give or take a couple of years. His head maintained a noticeable incline to meet her crinkle-eyed downward gaze as she beheld him, the vulpine stood before her in the company of her contoured chest.

His surprise abating, Freddie’s travel weary-brain ground laboriously into the new task of identifying his unexpected visitor. He knew no one with such a voice, nor the ability to access such a shelf with the lack of effort she showed. He also wasn’t aware of anyone who was expecting his arrival as he’d maintained contact only with former classmates who had themselves long since moved on. To him, the identity of the young woman stood before remained a mystery.

And then his little grey cells began to piece together the scraps that she was so unwittingly offering him. She was a feline. Yes, she was a feline, but what sort? House cat? No. Tiger? Definitely not. Lion? Didn’t look like it. And while it was true that he knew no one of such stature apart from vague acquaintances or people he knew merely by sight, there was something familiar about her height. And then there were her eyes: a pure, wonderful blue that seemed to glitter as they considered him from on high.

Just as his lips parted to express his fresh bout of shock and surprise, she forestalled him with her own exclamation: “You came back!”