

## The Inheritance

On paper, the whole affair is almost offensively cliché. It's entirely possible that certain peoples, attempting to sound intelligent, might even call it derivative, without defining what it was derivative of. Nonetheless, here's how it all started: A young man, with little to no prospects received notice of an inheritance from an uncle that he had never met, comprised of a very generous monthly allowance, and a parcel of land in the general area of Southern Illinois, which for many is simply the geographical black hole between Chicago and Kentucky

Kevin Barrett was an honest, well-meaning, young man. So begins his, one might call it, uninterested eulogy. Though one must give credit where credit is due. There was nothing malicious in his nature. Nor was there was anything remarkable or heroic about him. No hamartia, no single flaw which, despite his remarkable virtues, doomed him to a surprisingly specific, almost ludicrous, mode of destruction ala Achilles and others of his mythological ilk. Kevin was just a normal guy. Good at selling TV's at the local appliance and hardware store. Affable, sweet at times, well liked because he could take a joke, and when I say that what I actually mean is that he was the sales department's bitch. He didn't mind the jabs and barbs, it made him feel like one of the boys. Kevin almost never took vacation, which is why management begrudgingly allowed him two weeks when he received notice of his inheritance some 600 miles away.

Kevin. Truth is I just like saying the name. It's such a basic name. It's very hard for me to form any conclusions when I hear it. We all unconsciously make assumptions about people when we hear their name for the first time. We regularly associate attitudes or modes of behavior to specific names. I've known people who thought the worst of every Ashley or Scott without ever having actually met them. A rose by any other name may be assumed to be a thorny vine, depending on the name of course. To date, I haven't met anyone who hated a Kevin sight unseen, though I'm sure they exist. My suspicion is the female counterpart to Kevin is Katy, but I could be mistaken.

I'm rambling. No one is reading this to hear what I think about names and the subjective presuppositions they carry with them, unbeknownst to the name-bearers. The reality is, the vast majority of us carry a projected curse of some sort from everyone who happens to pass us in the street. At a glance we are all wadded up, like a piece of paper, into a single crumpled up idea, and dismissed into the waste bin.

Back to Kevin. A letter, which looked suspiciously like junk-mail, was deposited on his computer desk by his girlfriend Emmanuelle, who, like her name, was far too exotic, attractive, and interesting, to be romantically entangled with a sweet little dough-boy like Kevin. I suppose it is possible that his sweet, unassuming, dough-boy nature was exactly what attracted her to him. Nonetheless, most outside observers were continuously confounded by how he landed such a woman as her. All that to say, she left a letter on his desk.

It took Kevin a moment to decipher the legalese, and when he finally did he assumed it was some sort of a prank. In fact he almost threw the letter away, but decided against it because, "what if." He called the number of the law office, not expecting an answer because it was after five. But the attorney, Shannon Moore, picked up the phone. Speaking of assumptions based on names, Kevin had

assumed Shannon was a woman, but he was mistaken, Shannon was a man, and Kevin was surprised by the sonorous bass that cut the ring-tone short. After awkwardly confirming he had reached the right Shannon, Kevin explained who he was. Shannon was very friendly, and informed Kevin that yes, he did have an uncle who left him an inheritance, and no, it was not a scam. A check had been mailed out the day after the letter he had already received, and once Kevin felt more comfortable he could relay his bank information to Shannon so that they could set up a direct deposit for his monthly allowance. Continued receipt of the allowance depended on upkeep of the still unnamed uncle's property in perpetuity. The first check was a freebie, so to speak, but all that followed had to be earned. Kevin could wait until he received the check to decide, for if he decided not to take care of the property, he would be cut off. Shannon informed Kevin that he would await his decision.

After the phone call was over, Kevin, still not convinced it wasn't a scam, did the only sensible thing and looked Shannon Moore up on the internet. Mr. Moore was indeed a lawyer at a small firm situated in Southern Illinois, specializing in wills and family law. He had long, salt and pepper hair and a mostly pepper beard. His picture seemed too friendly for a lawyer. Kevin was used to scowling and/or tough billboard lawyers, silently asking him if he'd been in an accident, and if the answer was yes he should call them and tell them all about it.

Shannon was real. Given this fact, the inheritance was probably also real. It could still be an elaborate hoax, however since there were local reviews of his services dated some six years ago, the pranksters would have had to have started planning it well in advance, and that hardly seemed worth it. Kevin reflected that he never won anything, except for a gift card at a company event. Now he had essentially won the lottery. As I believe I noted before, the allowance was very generous. All that remained was to receive the check, cash the check, and see if it bounced.

Emmanuelle was very happy for him. As a demonstration of this, she agreed to celebratory sex, despite having had a long day. Afterward, she told Kevin about how Abby had been kind of a bitch all day and in what ways Abby had been a bitch and how certain things Abby had said had sounded pretty bitchy, concluding with: but that's awesome about the inheritance and do you think you'll keep working. To which Kevin replied that he was sorry Abby had been a bitch in all of the ways Emmanuelle had described and after a moment of reflection responded: I'm not sure, I haven't gotten that far, I guess if it's real I won't have to, but I think I'll get bored if I stop working. They agreed that no decision had to be made that night. Thereupon they cuddled on the couch and watched a movie.

When they came to a good stopping place, they paused the movie for a bathroom break. Before starting again Emmanuelle asked Kevin if he had any idea who the uncle was. Kevin responded that he must be on his father's side. He had never met his father, having been the product of a drunken one night stand. His mother, who had long since passed away, had two sisters, who he had fallen out of touch with. Since he knew nothing about his father's family it seemed reasonable to assume it was his old man's brother, though he didn't know how this mysterious uncle could've found him.

They continued the movie, but both of them fell asleep before it was over. They stirred just enough to move into a more comfortable spooning position on the couch, which was very large, a splurge that they had not regretted.

A few days after Kevin had received the letter, and more importantly deposited the check, he flew out to SIA airport with a brief layover in St. Louis. The day of his departure was Friday. Emmanuelle,

who was not able to get time off on such short notice, would join him on Sunday. She worked part time, Wednesday through Saturday. Ordinarily, she used the remainder of the week for working on her online business, selling stationary and trinkets, but she decided to use those few days as a mini-vacation over in SOIL, as it is sometimes referred to in the local vernacular. She would return Tuesday. Kevin would stay a little while longer to determine what upkeep was needed on the property. When they made their travel plans Kevin told Emmanuelle he'd miss her, to which Emmanuelle replied that she'd miss him too, even though in reality she was looking forward to having the apartment to herself, even if it was just for a few days.

On the morning of his departure Emmanuelle woke up early, drove him to the airport in her pajamas, and returned home to sleep for another 45 minutes or so. When she awoke she dutifully responded to Kevin's sweet, perhaps too sweet, texts about missing her already. At work she set her phone on silent for a meeting and forgot to check it for several hours after. When she finally remembered, she found many more adoring texts. Kevin was in the air at the time and wouldn't get her responses, so she waited until it was almost his arrival time and then replied so that her messages would be waiting for him when he landed. Upon arrival he texted her back immediately. Roughly an hour later he texted her again.

"Found Shannon. He's got me set up at a nearby hotel. Heading to property now. Will text later."

After work, Emmanuelle did a short HIIT routine, followed by ten minutes of yoga. She showered, made a salad, and sat down on the couch to watch TV. Originally, she had planned not to drink that night. However, she changed her mind after observing a character drinking in the show she was watching. As she was opening a bottle of Merlot, she received another text from Kevin.

"Saw property. It's just a field and a couple hills. Pretty barren, not much growing on it. A little disappointed. Shannon's pretty nice, but weird."

Emmanuelle put off replying, deciding she'd pretend her phone had died, and mentally preparing an explanation for how this had happened: the charger must not have been plugged in all the way. She finished her show and prepared to reply to Kevin when he sent her yet another text message.

"Something's off about this property. Wish I could sell it but I don't get the allowance without it. There's an old burnt out house, with a cellar. Shannon said he'd show it to me tomorrow, couldn't go in because it's too dark. Makes me feel uneasy. Will call when I get to hotel."

Emmanuelle responded with a generic "sounds good!" She performed her basic evening rituals and climbed into bed, waiting for Kevin to call. She awoke at four in the morning, confused, and then a little concerned. Kevin had not called.

Emmanuelle, I think of you every day. Since we had started living together, we hadn't spent any extended time apart. Maybe a night or two, like when you went on that Bachelorette weekend with your friends. Now I have no idea how long it's been since I've seen you. I talk to you daily, just so I can pretend that I'm not talking to myself. I remember missing you that first night. I remember being excited thinking about how you would be joining me soon. When I remember the day I arrived, I live it all over again, blow for blow. I remember it as I was.

The day was a whirlwind. It started out great, Shannon was super nice. The property itself though, I mean there's nothing there. There are some pretty hills, but it's all dead grass and trees. It doesn't help that it's winter. It just feels so desolate. Shannon seemed so pleased with the land too, maybe he knows something I don't, maybe it's beautiful in the summer, but right now it's just depressing. Depressing is fine, but that cellar or whatever it is, I don't know. I wish Shannon had showed me it first.

It was getting dark and I mentioned that I was tired, I was trying to hint that I wanted to call it quits for the day. Shannon told me he had one more thing to show me. We were standing on top of a hill. There was a line of trees to one side of us. We followed the trees down the hill which naturally sloped to our right, in a subtle curve, so that the trees hid an old, burnt out house, until you rounded that curve that you weren't even aware of, and then there it was, a husk in an evergreen alcove. All that remained was an old stone chimney, and a few posts sticking out of the ground. As we approached it, I saw that there wasn't a fireplace to the chimney. It looked like the stones extended into the ground and that the hearth was somewhere below. The posts looked the same way. There was no remnant of a foundation. The charred beams extended from the ground as though the structure they had once belonged to was buried underneath the dead grass, which I guess was possible, depending how old it was. When we got closer I saw that there was a cellar door flush against the remnant of a brick wall. It was like one of those old-timey cellar doors, that when opened looked directly up at the sky, kind of like a tornado shelter or something. Without a word, Shannon opened the door to the cellar and motioned me towards it. I walked up next to him and looked down a flight of stairs. In the waning sunlight I could only see the first half dozen steps, beyond that darkness stretched with no perceptible end. The darkness at the end of the stairs loomed menacingly, somehow casting dread upwards into me. On the walk down the hill, I had been thinking that the property looked good with the sun setting. I was starting to feel good about it until we came to the house, more specifically the cellar. Somehow the shadow in the stairwell swallowed up everything outside of it, stripping away the beauty of the sunset, and all of the peace that it brought with it. Shannon commented that we couldn't go down there just then, since it was getting dark. I didn't reply, but I was thinking that I'd prefer not to go down there at all, no matter what time of day it was. He led me back to the car. On my own I would have never been able to find my way back. Not that I would have ever been out there on my own, but if I had been, I would have been completely lost.

Shannon talked all the way back to the hotel. He asked me what I thought of the property, but didn't stop talking long enough for me to answer. I don't know what I would've told him if he had let me respond. The truth is, I wanted the allowance, so I was going to keep the property. Otherwise I'd just get rid of it, and never set foot on it again.

I slept uneasily that night, if at all. Whenever I did sleep I was aware of it, so it didn't really count, all it did was make the time go faster, so when the alarm finally went off my body felt like I had been asleep for an hour at best, but my mind had been half trapped in waking sleep for a small eternity. Time is such a weird thing when you're restless at night. It just stretches forever, and then all at once it snaps back and you find it wasn't such a long time after all, and your body and mind can tell through the lack of rest. Yesterday's aches still permeate you, compounded by the pain of a restless night. All night, waking or sleeping, I stared into that stairwell. Something down there was taunting me. In reality,

nothing was taunting me but my own imagination. I was curious, but still afraid. When Shannon picked me up, cheerful and full of energy, asking me if I was ready to head back to the property, I said yes. Weirdly enough I kind of meant it. We picked up breakfast on the way.

The walk to the old house didn't seem as long the second time. As we walked down the hill, I stared at the woods, trying to catch a glimpse of the house through the trees. My heart started beating heavily. We rounded the sylvan curtain and there it was. Somehow it startled me. It was weird, I was both excited and afraid. I was looking forward to going back there even though the stairs scared me.

The rest of the walk has disappeared from my memory. It's as though having seen the house I was immediately transported to the cellar door. I don't even remember it being opened. I saw the house and then found myself staring down at the cellar, it's mouth already open to the sky, waiting to swallow us.

Shannon pulled his hair back in a pony-tail, signifying that he was ready to explore, and started down the stairs. I followed. Fumbling in the dark he flipped an unseen switch. Lights went on all around us, pale green neon lights. They extended down, but not beyond, the stairwell. Shadow lurked at the bottom of the stairs, losing no ground to the sickly green light. He commented that the circuits only went so far, and that the rest of the complex was lit by gas lights.

The stairs led to a short hallway, at the end of which was a blue door with a number on it painted in a decorative font. Except for being at the end of a basement hallway, it looked like a door you would see in an average middle class neighborhood. It looked like it was trying to be inviting, which given the setting only made it seem sinister. As he walked, Shannon pulled a key from his pocket. He unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

It wasn't really a cellar. It was a house unto itself, just underground. He stepped to the side and left me to explore. The rooms were sparsely furnished, covered in dust and dirt. There was a master bedroom with a bed frame but no mattress, an old vanity with a cracked mirror, and not much else. Clothes were piled high in one corner. There was a bathroom, with gutted cabinets, an overturned bottle of cleaner of some kind. The kitchen floor: dirty, yellow linoleum, with a strange design on it, swirls that somehow mimicked both paisley and treble, but was neither and both. In the corner, next to the stove, some of it was peeling. Shannon joined me as I was pulling up the linoleum, much to his chagrin. I'm not sure what I was expecting to find, but there was only concrete.

It was weird. Everything in the house looked like it was from the late eighties, or the early nineties. There was a boy's room with a poster of Deanna Troi. A girl's room with Care Bears and My Little Pony everywhere, on toys, posters, and bed spreads. In the living room there was an old tube TV, with the little white dot, as though it had just been turned off. Wordlessly, Shannon led me to a stairwell, and we continued down.

Second floor. It was another house, basically, I mean, that's what the layout was like. There were windows, which was eerie. They just looked out at dirt, because we were underground. What weirdo puts windows in an underground house? Through one window I could see a recently deceased mole. You could still tell what it was, or had been, but worms had done a number on it.

Shannon led me from room to room. All the technology was older. If I had to guess I'd say it was the 60's. I noticed the layout was the same as the "house" above. Master bedroom, kids rooms, kitchen,

all basically the same, just different furnishings. In the living room there was a wood-stove with a pipe extending to the roof and then to who knows where. There was an overturned crib, buried in cobweb in the son's room which was decorated in a faded blue. Daughter's room, pink, with dolls strewn across the floor, glass eyes open, staring up at a ceiling mural, the scene of which was rendered unintelligible due to the flaking paint. The master bedroom, with no furniture but a bed frame, no mattress, like the room above. Beyond the skeletal remains of the bed was the closet, the door to which had been removed from the hinges and leaned up against the wall.

I peered through the bedroom into the open closet door. It was a small closet full of dusty hanging clothes. Shannon called to me from the living room, impatient to continue the tour. As I turned to him I saw the clothes move, as though someone were hiding behind them. When I turned back they were of course stationary. So much can be seen and imagined in the periphery of vision. So many things hide there, just out of sight, teasing, taunting, and creeping up on you, until there's no safe place to look, because demons hide in the corner of your eyes. Shutting the bedroom door, just to block the closet from view, I made my way to Shannon. He led me to another stairwell, and we continued down.

The third house was smaller, different layout, but I could see where the houses above would've been built on it, as though they were remodels. Kitchen, master bedroom, kid's room, there wasn't a separate one for boy and girl this time. Bathroom, claw-foot bathtub and toilet brimming with rat-life. They looked up at us only for a moment, and then turned back to whatever it is that rats do. Bedroom, with both frame and bed this time. The bed was torn to shreds revealing rusted springs and diseased looking foam. Shannon ushered me quickly through this house for some reason.

The fourth floor was just a kitchen, bedroom, and living room. It looked like a log cabin. There was one window. I approached it, but Shannon pulled me away. There wasn't just dirt beyond the glass. It was a cavern, that's all I could make out, just a large black, empty space, surrounded by rock and stalactite. I wanted to look, but Shannon was pushing me towards the stairs.

Fifth floor. Endless stone hallways, multiple rooms with nothing inside, floors made of sand, gaslights on the wall, catacombs. It would be very easy to get lost on that floor, I was grateful to have Shannon with me. I knew if I were to return to this... structure, it would be very unlikely I'd venture past the 1st floor. I never wanted to see the closet on the second floor again. I don't know why, but I couldn't stop thinking of it. My mind's eye became focused, until I could hardly see my surroundings. It was as though I were watching the closet in real time. Something was drawing me back. I stopped walking.

I saw a pale, thin hand slipping through the clothes, followed by a bare, diseased arm, and finally a white, bony face, with sunken eyes, rotted teeth and demonic grin. I imagined this ghastly figure crawling from the closet on all fours, making his way to the stairwell to block our return, his dirty rags dragging on the floor. He sat cross-legged right in front of the stairwell, waiting. When I walked back up those stairs he would jump on me, and climb onto my back. He would be light, he would not pose a physical threat, but he would cling to me violently, his raspy, stinking breath on my ear. His pale, thin, sore-covered arms would clutch my chest. His legs, with near translucent skin, barely distinguishable from the bone beneath would wrap around my waist. I would feel the sharp stubble of his sunken cheek, pressed against the top of my head, where my hairline had receded. He was not dangerous, just disgusting, and I would never be able to put him down. As though aware of this strange vision, an unearthly, pained, moan rose from some far off chamber of the stone labyrinth. Working in tandem, the vision and the moan sent chills through my body, and it was all I could do to keep from running towards

where I thought the stairwell was, but reason thankfully held me back. I didn't know where the exit was, I just had a vague idea of the general direction it was in. Getting lost in the labyrinth, accompanied by strange visions, and moaning sounds, was something I wanted to avoid if at all possible.

The sixth floor was one long hallway leading to a door. The walls were a dingy, aged white, with gold colored trim. They were covered with paintings that looked like they were from the home of an 18<sup>th</sup> century French nobleman. Lords and ladies watched us as we walked down the hallway. They all looked like I could be related to them. Beneath the dust and dirt was a floor of marble, with intricate designs, much like the linoleum a few floors above, useless niceties of different ages.

As I approached the door at the end of the hallway, the pictures began to appear more and more modern, until the last picture was of a young man with a distinctly 1980's haircut. He wore a blue, long-sleeved, collared shirt, with two yellow stripes across the chest. He seemed very happy. The background was a vague, cloudy, lavender color, like so many pictures taken in photographer studio's. The subject, that is, the man in the photograph, looked very much like me. It made me uneasy.

Walking through the door, I found myself in an empty room, alone. Shannon had disappeared. I didn't know when, and I didn't know how but he was gone. I searched my memory and realized that he had sort of faded into the background shortly after pulling me from the window looking out at the cave. That couldn't possibly be the case though, because if it were, that means I would have found my way through the fifth floor, that stone maze, down the stairs, through the hallway, and to the empty room. How could I have done that, and why would I have done that, on my own. But I had, Shannon wasn't with me on the fifth floor.

I looked around the room. There was nothing remarkable about it. The floor was cement. The walls were some sort of beige color, the ceiling was white. That was it, just four boring walls, a floor, and a ceiling. The placement, at the end of a long hallway, suggested that there was something important about that room. If it was important, there was no telling why, not from its appearance at any rate.

I found I was not as alarmed at being suddenly alone as I probably should have been. I decided to leave. I'd find my way, with or without Shannon, who was probably just waiting for me on the floor above.

No sooner had I decided to leave then I found there was no longer a door. Four boring walls, a floor, a ceiling, and no way out. No light source, and yet I could see. The strange thing was I didn't feel panicked, or afraid, the whole thing just seemed curious, odd, inevitable.

A shadow grew in the corner, still I was not alarmed. There was no light that a figure could use to cast a shadow, and yet there it was, growing. I faced it, still unafraid, though my mind told me that I should be. It is a rare thing, when the mind is telling the "heart," so to speak, to be frightened. Fear is usually the instinctual, gut-reaction, feeling response to the outside world, and then the mind catches up to analyze the fear, the threat, to determine the appropriate response. I should have at least tried to run, but I didn't. A feeling of doom settled upon me, but somehow I didn't mind.

Out of the corner crawled the revenant, the skeletal figure from the closet, my vision come to life. Rags hung from his body. Shadows collected in the sunken valleys between the ridges of his ribcage. His spine rose up from his sickly flesh like the back of some deep-sea monster breaching just for a

moment; that spine looked as though poised to break through the taut, jaundiced skin struggling to contain it.

Bony fingers took hold of my feet. The man slowly climbed me. I stood motionless, still unafraid, no matter what my rational mind told me. I told myself to shake him loose, he was so weak, I could easily overcome him. Nonetheless, I didn't move as he climbed up onto my back. He squeezed me as tight as he could, which wasn't very tight at all. It seemed to take all of his strength just to hold on.

We stood like that for a moment. This bizarre goblin, draped over my shoulders. I noticed a slow change taking place. I began to feel poorly, weak, tired. The sores on his arms faded into now healthy skin, his hair grew back, his grip became stronger, until it began to hurt, until it felt as though his clutching fingers would break through skin and fat, into the muscle and bone beneath.

The room around us shrunk and shifted into a glass box. I saw a house being built around us. A bedroom grew, fully furnished. From the bedroom grew a bathroom and a living room. From the living room grew a kitchen, a dining room, a foyer, and a front door, that led to nowhere. Then came a second bedroom, and then a bathroom which was shared by the third bedroom that grew from it. I heard the echo of your voice, Emmanuelle, followed by a younger one, androgynous, but somehow I still knew it was a boy, only for a moment though, the sound faded very quickly, so I couldn't be sure if I had heard anything or just imagined it.

As the creature on my shoulders grew younger, I grew older. I became a hunchback under his weight, until I fell to my knees beneath him. I couldn't see myself, but I knew I was gray. Blue, bulging veins rose up from the back of my hands as the skin became thin. I looked up and found myself in the hall of portraits, every picture was alive, staring down at me in sadistic amusement. All I could think was, I don't want this. No sooner had I thought this then a voice replied, you don't get to choose what we pass on to you. I could feel the marrow in my bones being sucked out into his body. I watched as my hands dried up and turned to dust. My body collapsed into ash beneath the weight of the man, and all who came before. These ashes build and bury the new first floor, paint another portrait.

I don't know how much time has passed. Shannon comes to see me periodically. He maintains the house, such as it is. The lights are always dim, I can barely make out the gold colored frames lining the hallway. Gold colored, the paint is flaking away on most of them. I can never see the subjects of the paintings, I have only the vaguest idea of who they are. Each one is just a floor in an inverted pyramid, burying us deeper and deeper. Some days I drift through the rest of the house. Most days I just hang on the wall, staring out a dusty hallway, waiting to build one more house.

Emmanuelle was concerned, and that is putting it mildly. Kevin had not called her the first night. He had not called, or texted, the second day, or night. The third day she was at the airport as had been planned, but now she had to worry about Kevin along with the inevitable TSA groping. TSA always flagged her. She was attractive, and neither men nor women, with the merest modicum of power, could pass up the opportunity to run their hands through parts generally reserved for lovers and doctors.



She worried about Kevin during the drive to the airport. She worried about Kevin as she checked her bags. She worried about Kevin in line. She was briefly distracted by a portly, middle-aged woman's hands searching her bra's underwire, as well as her thigh, close enough to feel vaginal heat. However, once that was over, she immediately began worrying about Kevin again.

Ordinarily, Emmanuelle liked flying, TSA groping notwithstanding. This particular flight however, was a remarkably negative experience from beginning to end. All they were able to get for her in their price range was a middle seat. A young woman, new to flying, sat on her left, an elderly man, who was best friends with everyone he met, and an over-sharer to boot, sat to her right. Upon take-off the young woman whimpered quietly and grabbed Emmanuelle's hand, perhaps unconsciously. Meanwhile, the old man talked, seemingly not caring whether or not anyone was listening. Halfway through the flight they were met with some particularly bad turbulence, which caused the young woman to again grab hold of Emmanuelle's hand and squeeze anytime the plane shook. The old man decided that it was an appropriate time to bring up a recent plane crash which had been in the news, one in which there were no survivors. Emmanuelle wondered if she could tell him to shut up. She decided against being rude, even though in that particular instance she had every right to be. Somehow she managed to change the subject and the man, like a windup toy, ran with it.

After landing she rented a car. After renting a car, she looked up Shannon's office. She found his number and called it, but no one picked up. She found his address, and drove a good forty minutes to find an old dilapidated building which had clearly not been used for quite some time. She checked online, Shannon's website had been taken down. She found the police station, and reported Kevin as missing.

She extended her stay at the hotel. She followed every lead she could find. The airport showed her footage of Kevin meeting Shannon, which in the end only tortured her. The last she ever saw of Kevin was some grainy footage of him stepping into the back seat of a black Lincoln town car. They ran the license plates and came up with nothing. Kevin looked so happy, blurred as the footage was. It broke her heart. The worst thing was not knowing what had happened.

Emmanuelle, spoke with numerous attorneys in the area, trying to find leads on Shannon, on unclaimed land, or property owned by the recently deceased. She checked public records. She learned local lore, local ghost stories, local feuds, she learned everything she could. Nothing brought her any closer to finding him.

After a month and a half she returned home. She had lost her day job, but had managed to maintain her online business. Her plants had died. Her mailbox was full. Her apartment was empty. She wasn't used to feeling alone. She had always roomed with her sisters, and then with a boyfriend, Jonah, more out of rebellion than love. Then there was Alan, for a month or two, and then Kevin. Her parents liked Kevin, even though he'd never amount to anything. He cared for Emmanuelle, and that was a step above his predecessors.

Two months had passed since the disappearance, and Emmanuelle decided to stop ignoring the signs and purchase a pregnancy test. It must have been the night Kevin received the letter. She didn't know how she could raise a child on her own, but having an abortion seemed like a betrayal to his memory.

It was a long lonely nine months, the majority of which she spent arguing with her parents, informing them in no uncertain terms that no, she should not move back in with them. Nine months passed, and she finally had a new companion. Someone to share life with, carrying a piece of someone she had lost. It wasn't long before she recognized his eyes, staring up at her in that tiny little person. As the child grew she saw various traits emerge that could only have come from him. She loved the child, devoting all her time and energy to him, to the detriment of her own personal life. She doted on him until her own untimely death. It was a boy, the spitting image of his father.