

## unwritten letters to a dead man

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/55232005) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/55232005>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">Major Character Death</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Lifesteal SMP</a>
Relationships:	<a href="#">Ashswag/Reddoons (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Ashswag/Reddoons (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Ashswag (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Reddoons (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - World War I</a> , <a href="#">Hurt No Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Flashbacks</a> , <a href="#">Poverty</a> , <a href="#">implied/referenced war</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Character Death</a> , <a href="#">Depression</a> , <a href="#">Sort Of</a> , <a href="#">Unreliable Narrator</a> , <a href="#">Chronic Pain</a> , <a href="#">author does not have chronic pain, so it is not really described</a> , <a href="#">Dissociation</a> , <a href="#">Self-Hatred</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of <a href="#">fey's roses &amp; smoke   2024</a>
Stats:	Published: 2024-04-15 Words: 2,061 Chapters: 1/1

# unwritten letters to a dead man

by [Fey\\_wilde](#)

## Summary

### day 2: promises/betrayal

*It's like we're married*, Ash had joked, far more than once, shoving aside the stacks of notices with their printed red block letters screaming out their contents to the world, to instead fill the cups with diluted juice that tasted like the memory of summer fruit. To spread cheap jam onto bread that breaks their teeth when they bite into it, but it was sweet, and that's what mattered.

Now the cups are empty.

## Notes

cw: self-hatred/self-ablism (ash calls himself a cr\*ppe once)

like it says in the tags, i do not have chronic pain. please do not take what i've written as true. i did ask one of my friends who has chronic pain to read it over but i can never truly characterise what it feels like

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The water from the taps is never clean.

Stained ruddy with rust and dirt and God knows what else, it always bubbles over in spurts, lack of pressure barely driving it through the tap itself, with sputters of air that rattle the pipes in the walls enough to make the shitty cabinets tremble with their contents. Running it for any length of time will clear it up, slightly, *eventually*, though not nearly enough that any sane person would even consider drinking it.

It's something so ingrained into everyday living, a simple fact of life, existing since the day they first stepped foot into the old cabin, that Ash has long grown deaf to the noise. Grown senseless to the slight tremors that run through the probably rotting floorboards. Desensitised, maybe.

It no longer makes him jump, at the very least; something that Red would always tease him for until the involuntary habit finally stopped.

*"It happens every time," he laughed, heavy hand falling down to rest on his shoulder. Leaned over to watch Ash work, even though it was as fucking boring as it got: washing dishes. His calluses always caught on Ash's clothing, a complaint he never seemed to hear. "Stop being such a scaredy-cat."*

*Ash bared his teeth to hide an involuntary smile, struggling to knit his eyebrows into a frown. Eyes still murky with sleep, sensitive skin scratched against the dried substance he hadn't bothered with cleaning out yet, turning the frown into a wince. Red only laughed harder; so Ash, taking advantage of his half-squinted eyes and shaking body, cupped his hands into the stream of brown-red water, twisted around, and flung it at Red's face. The laughter stopped immediately, followed by a satisfying yelp.*

*"What the fuck, man?" Red brought up an arm to scrub at his face, his bedhead nest of copper hair now dripping with a similarly coloured water. It flopped over his face, annoyingly cute. "You're gonna give me tetanus!"*

*Ash had sneered, chapped lips pulling back to reveal his gums, "Serves you right," but it was too hard to choke back his own laughter; dishes long forgotten. The baring of his teeth turned into a smile rather than a frown. Red reached around him, trying to get at the stream of water as well, prompting Ash to spin fully around and push him away, grin tugging at his lips—*

The tap splutters again, spraying up a cloud of mist that flecks against his face. Ash numbly shuts off the water, very suddenly and acutely aware of the stack of bills silent on the table behind him. Glaring invisible holes into the back of his neck.

At least the water wets his dry face. He knows, soon, that the evaporation will leave it further irritated with metal oxides.

The scratched sink, worn from years, perhaps whole *decades* of use— far too costly to replace in *this* economy— swirls with murky water, lapping at the edges of the dishes not quite submerged, using each other as stepping stools to reach for freedom. It still sends

shivers up his arms every time at the idea of plunging his hands into it to clean. Apprehension clouds him, a sort of heavy chill that settles in his head and chest. Still, it works. So much better than hauling water in gallon buckets from the nearby stream.

It hasn't made them sick. Yet.

The scent of rust stings his nose, rising slowly in evaporated droplets. Rust, like Red's hair; always stained with oil from hours at the mechanic's workshop, because Ash can't work with the way his bones always seem to ache with a deep-set sort of pain that never fades. Rust; like the old machinery that litters their isolated home, abandoned from ages past, imprinted with fading hands that once toiled to keep the things alive. Rust; like blood. Blood; from age-old scars on his hands and knees, drawn up from countless falls and scuffles he really should have avoided. Blood; from accidental stumbles into barbed wire, into sheer-sharp and dusty glass from old beer bottles mimicking rocks on the ground. Blood, blood, blood; soaking into the mud of battlefields—

The plate slips from his hands.

It clatters, muffled, slipping under the water to slam against the cheap porcelain and plastic and metal of its compatriots. And Ash can only stare down at it, unseeing, before autopilot takes over, tugs at his arm and pulls it from the depths. The sponge, stringy and filled with more holes than normal, trembles in his hand, water seeping from its pores. His fingers won't unclench. *It's just joint pain. It's just joint pain. You're used to it.* So he holds it beneath the water instead, wincing every time it scrapes against the other dishes, forces his aching knuckles to slam against the solid surfaces which yield far less forgivingly in the dense fluid.

The shaking won't stop— which is fine, he's used to it. Years, years, years of it. Settling into his bones and weighing his lungs and turning his tendons to stone. Doesn't mean he can't resent it. Wish to be like every other fucking person, prancing around like they've never felt hurt in their lives. Resent the way Red breaks his back trying to scrape together a living while Ash sits at home like some kind of *housewife*, every joint on fire and every step feeling like a thousand razor blades sinking into his flesh.

Ash blinks.

The last dish sits pristine in his hand, tugging at the stiff tendons in his wrist.

Outside, the sun just peeks over the treetops, sinking into a sea of orange and pink. Painting the trees pitch and two-dimensional.

They only own two plates anyway. Two bowls. *There's no need for more*, Red had said once. *Why own so many when two works just fine?*

The unpaid electrical bill glares at him from the dining room table.

Two sets of forks, of knives, of spoons. Metal is expensive these days, after all. Red had once suggested selling all the useless metal in the yard. Perhaps some of it (although most of it was rusted through to dust) could be of use. Moulded into shapes for death instead of life. Into solid wings and twisted hollow cylinders. Into casings for gunpowder and fire.

Two cups, scratched and chipped. One purple, one red, with stupid stickers pasted onto the sides faded and worn white. The adhesive never quite came off no matter how hard Ash scrubbed, papery fibres clinging with all their lifeless might onto the now-mostly-opaque plastic. *It's like we're married*, Ash had joked, far more than once, shoving aside the stacks of notices with their printed red block letters screaming out their contents to the world to instead fill the cups with diluted juice that tasted like the memory of summer fruit. To spread cheap jam onto bread that breaks their teeth when they bite into it, but it was sweet, and that's what mattered.

The house is empty. It's pasted, imprinted, *coated* with the lives of two. Pictures, paintings, little trinkets cheaply made in some factory by child exploitation that they can't be bothered to think on. Cool-shaped rocks, shiny rocks, rocks that just have cool colours. Plants neither of them can manage to keep alive, except for that one tomato plant that still clings to life in the corner.

Two initials, carved messily into the walls.

The house is empty. Silent. It might as well be abandoned, even though a living, breathing person still occupies its space.

Does he even count as one, though? Limping through each day a zombie, a husk of a human being with aching joints and dead eyes, setting both sides of the rickety table even though Red isn't home.

Red is gone.

He left a long time ago.

*"This offers four times what I make," Red had murmured into Ash's hair, arms looped around him. A tight embrace that restricted his breathing, just slightly. Reminiscent of the times Red would squeeze his bones tight during episodes, as if attempting to glue all the broken messes within back together. "Think of everything we could afford."*

*"What am I supposed to do when you're gone?" Ash whispered back, lips brushing against Red's rough woollen shirt, his own arms doing their best to squeeze the life out of Red. He barely coughed at the pressure. "What do I do if—"*

*"Shhh." A warm, too warm, always warm hand pressed over his mouth. Broke the embrace, too, flooding Ash's sides with cold air, brewing indignation. "No. I'll come back. It'd be cringe if I didn't."*

*A laugh, choked and wet. "Yeah. Imagine dying in war, huh?"*

*Red's chest stuttered, amplified in their proximity. Ash could feel his heartbeat, even through the thick layers of fabric, thudding heavy in his ear. "Imagine," he drawled, an odd tone to his voice. He's reconsidering, Ash told himself. He's going to stay. "I mean, you gotta be just so bad to let that happen."*

*Ash made another sound. It wasn't quite a laugh: more like a bitterly amused noise, mixed with a painful, throat-tearing sob, barely hidden. Not hidden at all, really— Red noticed it anyway. He always noticed. A quality (more like flaw) that Ash had yet to see in anyone else, despite the thousands of people he had crossed paths with. The thousands he had dealt with. The thousands he had to crawl through mind-numbing, unimportant, directionless conversations with. Red is the only one who actually knows what he feels. The only one who can carry a conversation that doesn't make him want to tear his ears off and scream until his throat goes raw.*

*It irked him. It left an unpleasant warmth in his chest. He didn't like it. He wanted to punch Red in the face every time he picked apart Ash's emotions. Wanted to spit at every correct action Red made. Wanted to collapse into a pile of trembling limbs at Red's feet and beg him to keep understanding.*

*He stayed, anyway.*

*It wasn't like he had anywhere else to go.*

*(Who'd take care of a cripple?)*

*"I'll be fine. I'll send postcards."*

*"Don't you fucking dare send postcards," Ash snarled.*

*Then, quieter— "Promise?"*

*Ash hated how his voice wobbled the moment the words left his mouth. It was too late to pull them back, yet he still wished. Pretended his face wasn't back buried into Red's chest, cheeks most probably blotchy with colour, welling tears beginning to soak into Red's shirt.*

*"I promise." Red pulled back, only slightly, fighting against the resistance of Ash's embrace. Smiled down at him. Ash always hated that height difference. Wished, once, to break Red's knees, lop off a few inches with an axe or something. Yet the attempt to weaponise the once-strong feeling, gathering it into a tight ball in his chest, remained feeble as always. It spluttered, a weak flame, hardly warming the chill that seeped into his veins. "Pinkie promise."*

*Ash glared at the offending finger, vision hazy with unshed tears. "I fucking hate you," he muttered, hooking his pinkie around Red's. "I'm going to cut that off if you don't come back."*

*"Oh, Ash." Red pulled him back into the hug, and Ash had to turn his face quickly to avoid breaking his nose. "I'd never lie to you."*

The sun is beyond the horizon now. Every blink sends him reeling hours into the future, standing motionless in front of the sink. Grey-orange light glitters in the undrained water, staining his water-chilled hands warm. If he closes his eyes, he can imagine the fading heat like Red's hands.

He always warmed up Ash's hands. Complained that Ash's were *too cold*.

One year ago.

One year. Six months. Seven days.

And counting.

“Fuck you, Red,” he rasps at nothing. Stares at the trees. “You promised it’d only be six months.”

There were no letters in the mail. No letters, apart from the late notices. No letters, apart from the tax filings for the year. No letters, apart from the useless newspapers that never said anything important. Words and words and words that meant *nothing* because—

Because Red isn’t—

Dull nails dig into soft flesh, an ache that trickles down the nerves of his arms. It reminds him of the days when he can't even leave his bed.

“You *promised*.”

## End Notes

day 2 is completed!! hope you enjoyed :D

comments, kudos appreciated. let me know if there's any formatting/spelling/grammar errors!

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