

# Terrainer – Diaries

By MzHartz

Published on Stories Space on 31 May 2019



A woman looks for her place at the end of the world.

<https://www.storiesspace.com/stories/drama/-terrainer-diaries-.aspx>

Dear Bryce,

I've come to realize, three things that should never be withheld from being said are, "Please," "Thank you," and, "I'm sorry."

Please, don't take this letter the wrong way. This isn't an attempt to reestablish contact with you or rekindle our friendship. Although, I would like to talk to you again, see how you've been, and possibly even become friends again, I don't think this is the place, way, or time. Therefore, I'm not including my contact information, or even my last name.

Instead, I want to say I'm sorry. You were kind, patient, and very tolerant to me, and I took that for granted. I used you. I wanted to have my cake and eat it too, and that wasn't right to do to you. I didn't treat you with the respect you deserved. I apologize for wasting a year of your life on the rollercoaster of emotions, the divisions, the secrets. It was rude of me to come between you and your friends, to make your friends question your friendship and your trust.

But I also have to say thank you. The year we spent together was probably the most pivotal year of my life. You taught me so much, even if I didn't get it at the time. I learned the value of treating everyone like a friend, even strangers like the cashier at the grocery store. You taught me the real way to be nice to people. You taught me how to love. The things I regret about our relationship are the stress I put you through, and that I've gone so long without apologizing to you for it. I owe a lot of the person I am today to you, and I'm proud of who I am.

I'm sorry for hurting you. Thank you for everything you've done for me. This is a letter asking for forgiveness, but you are in your rights to not forgive me. Even if you do, there's no reason to try to contact me to let me know.

Love,

Renee

Yes, Bryce, I meant Love. You were my first love. You taught me how to love. Although our love has passed, I still hold a place in my heart for you.

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What a crappy day.

Everyone at work has been getting sick. The flu has hit us hard this year. I think it's funny that everyone who's had a flu shot is getting sick, while I'm fine (Knock on wood).

When I got in the office this morning, I was the first one there. So of course, the phone rang off the hook, and none of the phone calls were for me. And instead of happily taking voicemail, everyone expected me to solve their problems. Don't they understand that I am one person, I can only do one job? I'm not trying to be rude, but that's why different people do different jobs. I would think they'd want the person with the most expertise to help them, not someone who admits they have no idea what's going on with that project.

Finally, Rebecca gets in, but she tells me that her husband, Don, is sick. Of course, he is. If anyone sneezes or coughs in the building, he claims to be sick too. But he's also a pain in my ass, so I'm glad that he wasn't there. If only his customers wouldn't call. But not having him asking me questions all day is a relief, and his customers are probably getting better service from me anyway.

But then Judy was late getting in too. When she came in and checked her voicemail, she found that Kenny had called in sick too. So we were at half staff today. But the customers weren't, they kept calling. One customer needed a project completed by the end of the day. I ended up staying late to take care of everyone else's jobs.

Then when I came home, Tom was collapsed in the hallway floor, still shaking. It had been a while since he had a seizure, but it wouldn't matter, it still scares me every time. I dropped my purse, tore off my coat, and dropped to his side. I took off his glasses so he wouldn't break them. Then I stroked his hair back from his face, unsticking it from the sweat beaded up on his forehead, kissed his cheek, and whispered, "It's okay honey. I'm here. It will be okay."

By the time he woke up, I was in tears. But he seemed okay, even better than he normally is when he has a seizure. He wasn't as weak and groggy as usual. I made a simple supper, drank an entire bottle of wine, and went to bed exhausted.

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I took Tom to the emergency room last night.

He had a fever of 104 again. He's had a high fever for over a week now. He's severely dehydrated. He can't keep down any food. He's literally starving.

And he's just like everyone else that was in the emergency room last night.

The hospital was over-capacity and under-staffed. They can't take anyone else in. Instead, a nurse gave me fluids and nutritional shakes and medicine, put an IV in Tom's arm, showed me how to hook it up, and sent us home. She didn't charge us, just gave us what we needed and got us out of there as soon as possible.

I've got Tom set up on a futon in the living room. Our house has become a hospital room. I'm not a nurse. I could never be a nurse, because I hate needles and faint at the sight of blood. But somehow, I get the bags of solution hooked up, make sure he gets his medicine, do everything she told me to.

I have to wear a mask all the time. It's itchy. I can't kiss my husband, because I might get infected. I don't go to work anymore. Not only do I have my hands full at home, apparently so does everyone else. There's no one left to work for.

People have died. Friends' spouses, clients' children, coworkers. I haven't gone to any of the funerals. There's too many, I'm afraid to leave Tom at home, and I just can't stand to. Nothing is happy anymore.

With nothing in his stomach, Tom vomited blood just now. I tried to clean it up, but I fainted. When I came to, I eventually was able to get it taken care of. He was crying, he's too weak to do anything else.

I think I'm losing him.

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I'm headed out of town on foot.

Tom passed away last night. His last words were, "I love you."

I told him, "I love you too." Then I took off the mask and kissed him. I know I shouldn't have. I know it's risky, but I couldn't let him go without one final kiss. So what if I get sick, what's life without him? I put the mask back on and climbed in bed with him. He put his head on my chest, and I stroked his hair as he fell asleep. He didn't wake up.

I tried calling the Funeral Home, but every time I called, there was either a busy tone or eternal ringing. The tv is on, but the news never comes on anymore. Instead, there's a ticker at the bottom of the screen urging people to stay home, especially if they are sick.

I felt trapped in the house. There was no use staying there anymore. I can't call anyone, I just get voicemail. So I packed up a backpack and walked to the sporting goods store. It was closed, but someone had smashed the window in. It was pretty picked through, but I ended up finding a bigger backpack with structure, some of those super thin warm blankets, and the smallest, easiest to carry tent I could find. When the backpack felt almost too heavy to carry, I strapped it on my back and left.

I see other people walking out of town too. Some people tried to drive, but the roads are gridlocked. I can see drivers slumped over their steering wheels. So most of us are weaving in and out of the parked cars, walking away from town. There are some people on bikes, but I'm afraid that I would topple over from the backpack.

I reached the last edge of town just as the sun dipped below the horizon. A tent city had been set up, and they lit a bonfire. Right now I'm sitting around the fire writing, while the people around me are making small talk. It's nice to be able to talk to people again.

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I'm still at the camp outside of town. There's been some discussion about moving, finding another place to settle down, but I prefer to remain on the outside of the circle. I haven't talked to many people. Where I dreaded my wallflower status before, now I relish it. I'm able to sit back and listen without any interruptions, no one asking for my opinion, and even better, no responsibilities given to me. There was talk about needing people to organize groups, and I was afraid they would look to me and ask for my help. If they did, I would have said no, even if it meant being kicked out of the camp. I'm not comfortable socializing like that.

I've always been a bit withdrawn, but I've been even more reserved than usual. I recognize that I'm grieving for Tom. I remind myself that he's no longer suffering. His final days were hard, and he slipped away slowly. I wouldn't wish him to be in that much pain and still living, not for my own selfishness. But that doesn't make the cold ground that I now sleep on any softer. When I roll over and reach for his warm body on the brisk fall nights, I wake up when my hand merely hits the floor of

the tent. For as tiny as this tent is, it's so empty without him there.

Our first apartment together had been so small, just a studio apartment with my twin bed pushed against one wall. We had both been living with our parents. He had moved back in with his elderly parents when he and his girlfriend had broken up. He could have gotten a place of his own again, but his parents needed the help. We met right before his dad died, so when Tom and I had decided to move in together, his mother made the right decision to get a condo at a fifty-five and over community. There were people her own age to socialize with there, things to do, and people to help with mowing the lawn and cleaning the house.

I had just started my senior year of college when Tom and I started dating. We moved into the tiny space the day I graduated. It was the best graduation present ever. Even though it was small, my twin-sized bed was more comfortable, so we moved it into our room. The small size also suited the place well. We pushed it against the wall so we wouldn't push each other out of bed. We were forced to sleep in each other's arms every night, but being in love, we didn't mind.

Lately, I've been reminded of the old apartment, especially the small bed, way too much. When I lay in bed with him as he lay dying, the bed was so small that I was forced to wrap my arms and legs around him to keep from falling out, and we slept just like we did many years ago. I think it comforted him as well. And now, I lay in this tiny one person tent. All I can think about is how much he would enjoy sharing this small space with me, certainly, prefer it to having a small single occupant tent of his own. I wish I could imagine it was him in the tent next to mine, but it's just too improbable.

Instead, my tent neighbor is a rather handsome yet quiet man. He's clearly American, but his parents had been Asian. Even now in these harsh living conditions, he dresses in slacks and sweaters worn over white dress shirts. There are very fine wrinkles around his eyes that hint that he may be older than I suspect he is. He keeps his tent neat, and I've caught glimpses that make me believe his bed is perfectly made every morning. I haven't gotten to speak to him. Like me, he keeps to himself. He's studying something, reading books, marking pages, highlighting paragraphs and making notes in the margins. In different circumstances, I would be very attracted to him.

Instead, we've kept each other quiet company. I'll be immersed in my writing and look up to find him reading and noting away right next to me. When I go to take a seat around the fire, I choose a seat next to him. We never make eye contact, yet I can feel there's some sort of comfort we take in being next to each other. I glanced over the other day and noticed a ring on his finger.

I can imagine him with a wife, small dark and mysterious, yet cheerful. Unlike my relationship, theirs is traditional. He's a professor - no a scientist - at the university, and she stays at home caring for the house. They don't have children, they aren't able to, and it saddens them. She thinks it's just as well, as immersed as he is in his work. But he is honorable, and he makes her proud. He thinks she is beautiful and supportive, and he loves her deeply. When she passes away, he gives her the best burial he can in their backyard, and says a prayer for her. The next day he tries to return to work, but no one is there and the doors are locked. With nothing to occupy his mind, he grieves for days. Finally, he decides that he can stay in that house with no purpose any longer. He packs up all the

research materials he can with a modest supply of clothes and meager rations, breaks into his old office to retrieve his materials, and sets off to find somewhere else to go. He finds this camp the same day I did and settled down here.

From where I'm sitting, I have to step over his legs to get to the outhouse. We look at each other for the first time and exchange our first words. "Excuse me." "I'm sorry."

I think he would be happy - no, not happy - content to stay here. Without her, he can't be happy. Without Tom, I can't be happy. But here, no one asks anything of us, which surprises me. Perhaps because we look busy. We have the freedom to delve deep into our work with no interruptions. Isn't this what we wanted all along anyway?

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Bryce walked into camp today. My emotions are mixed, and I feel guilty about it.

He's happy to see me. I'm supposed to be happy to see him. If I considered this morning how I would feel if he walked into camp, I would've said I'd be incredulous but excited. I've wanted to talk to him for years, but now I can't remember the words I wanted to say. Perhaps I said everything in my letter.

Bryce is next to me, and my wordless companion is situated on the other side of him. His permanent cheerful demeanor has shattered my quiet calm word. My aphonic relationship has been disturbed, and I wonder if it can recover. I want to push Bryce onto someone else, perhaps get him friendly with someone who would appreciate his optimism.

Before I lost Tom, I supposed that's what I was like. Now, I can only think about today. I now realize there may be no tomorrow. There are still people getting sick, even now. It's cruel, but they are basically kicked out of camp. I can't say I disagree with that decision; it would only take one person to decimate the entire tent city. I don't know where these people go. I don't know where I would go. Probably back home, cover up in my down comforters, and fall asleep hoping that I would be all better when I woke up, or that I wouldn't wake up at all.

This is my personal journal. I don't know if anyone will ever see it, or if I even want them to. I'm documenting everything else in a more official transcript. If I go, I will leave it behind for prosperity; perhaps it will be helpful to someone later. And it makes me feel like I'm doing something. Everyone else has skills, organizing, building, starting fires, even cooking, that I feel that I sorely lack in. I wonder what my neighbor is pouring himself into. I'm sure it's something important, but even if it isn't, he works as if it is. A cure? I pretend that he's a scientist working on a cure, I like that thought.

But with Bryce yammering on next to me, I may never find out. I resent his presence here. He's

interrupted my writing. I'm sure he thinks we have all the time in the world now.

I'm being too harsh on him. While he's cracking jokes, his laugh is strained. The quips are weak. This is his coping mechanism. While people like me and my neighbor shut down, he talks to keep his mind off of the situation. He was married, he lost his wife too. Perhaps if he can make someone smile, he can help too. He can't have changed that much throughout the years, I know inside that he's afraid. While he appears to be social and outgoing, the only person he's talked to is me. He's shy and scared.

That evening, with Bryce at my side, I sit within the meeting circle. Miraculously, they don't say anything to me. I sit there silently and document their decisions, without me telling them, they know what I've been doing. They've also seen Bryce today chatting me up while I smiled and nodded. To my relief, they ask him more about himself, and he converses with them. I know that now I'll have to sit within the circle, in the light, instead of on the edge of the darkness. I don't think anyone else minds where I sit, but Bryce will expect me there. He needs me there; he needs my support and strength. All I have to do is sit by his side, and he will work his magic.

He was a clown when we dated. I'm afraid of clowns. Oh, the irony. For my sake, he let me dictate his costume. I wouldn't let him wear the foam nose, large shoes, or curly wig. He made it work and was still an excellent clown. As long as he made people smile, he felt fulfilled. He stopped working as a clown right after we broke up. I don't know why. I've always held the guilty assumption that it had something to do with me.

He hadn't been sleeping in a tent before he found us, just in a sleeping bag under the stars. I think he wanted me to invite him into mine, but I couldn't stand to have anyone that close to me other than Tom. I don't know if I would ever let anyone that close to me ever again. Instead, some of the other campers rigged up a shelter for him using sheets, tarps, and sticks. I was fine with him setting up next to my tent, as long as it was on the other side of my quiet neighbor.

I'm writing by the fire now, and Bryce has finally gone off to bed, leaving me alone with my companion. It feels better now, a little more normal, whatever that may be.