

Tomorrow

The ground was cold and hard, as it always was. There were whispers about an earth that was soft, that absorbed water instead of just letting it run along the surface or in the cracks, but those were often hushed by the flood waters screaming death. It rained rarely, but when it did it was closer to a monsoon than any lighthearted showers. But rain, here in Hellanus, was never considered personal. It was always business, always cold and casual business. Not like sex could be and often was, but like death always is. And so the rains would eventually come. And the water will run through the cracks towards the river. And the river to the sea. But the river would be clogged with rotting logs from the lumber companies that used to float them to our town before everything was built with steel. And so the river was mostly stagnant, festering water with a tiny persistent stream that fought its way to the sea. And that meant that it would flood. And that flood would shut down Hellanus for days, weeks, or even—like once before—months. And people would die. In the last flood alone 45 people drowned.

“Do you ever want more?” he asked me. We were sitting in our spot, one of the few clearings in the woods that the logging companies had left behind. All the others had been filled in by the Prince and his council as part of the effort to protect the town from the rain. They clustered the trees to act like

an umbrella, forcing the rainwater to run-off down river and flood other towns. Not to mention that those black spears greedily blocked out the majority of the sky.

“Always,” I laughed. “Who doesn’t?” He didn’t look at me, so I continued, “I have countless memories as a child of dancing in the moonlight. Twirling faster and faster until the stars blurred together into concentric halos reaching out into forever like ripples on a pond. I wanted so badly to have my spirit explode from within my skin and travel with the halos.” I paused again. “I always felt trapped within my skin.”

He turned towards me, but still wasn’t looking at me. He was looking beyond me, through me towards some undefined point in the trees.

“I love you,” he said. For a brief moment, his eyes focused on me. And for a brief moment I saw myself as a little girl, dancing and spinning.

“I love you too,” I replied, reaching out for his hand. But he stood up and started to walk back towards Hellanus.

“Let’s head back,” he called over his shoulder. When I didn’t respond he turned and faced me. “Please get up.” I made a face at him. “You can’t even see the stars anymore. Let’s head back and go to bed I’m tired.”

“Why can’t we walk down by the shore? We haven’t done that in ages. Please, just for a little bit?”

“No, it’s too dark out there, you can barely see your hand in front of your face. And I don’t like the way that place makes me feel. It makes me remember things...”

“I know! I was sitting there when I remembered dancing in moonlight. Why can’t we—“

“No. Get up, let’s go. It might rain tonight.”

“How do you know? I don’t hear the sirens.”

“I heard my father talking, the Prince wants another cleansing.” His father worked for the Weather Department. The Prince would occasionally not sound the sirens in order to help overpopulation. He justified it as a “cleansing” of society. We would only survive, he would always say, with the best and brightest at the helm.

I nodded; a part of me had been expecting this. It had been a few years since the last one. “So we should pack a suitcase—just in case.”

He nodded. “Let’s go.”

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That night I dreamt:

My soul gave birth as the eve expanded. Exhaling, my soul contracted and a shadow immersed. I held a shadow in my arms: a baby with a black veil. It shuddered violently as though a war was converging within it. My hands began to freeze—its small body drawing out every last breath of heat from my core. The midnight stars began to chant: “kill him, kill him.” They spun, unstable, erratic, expanding above our heads. “Kill him, kill him.” Mighty pines erupted from the earth encircling us--“kill him, kill him”--and speared the black sky. The stars were silenced. The veil began to exude a thick white fog. The pine air turned icy. The baby grew smaller and smaller. I frantically stripped the outer layers of the pinewood and tried to build a fire, but it burned too quickly to give off heat. I tried feverishly to warm him, pressing him to my breast, but he only grew smaller. The body vanished. I couldn’t save him. “Kill him, kill him.”

When I awoke, the stars were gone. He was gone. There was only rain. Lots of rain. I looked out the window to see him get into a car with another woman. And the taillights blurred as the

raindrops slammed into the cracked earth, unable to be absorbed, never to be absorbed, and run through the cracks towards the river.

And so the taillights were gone as the flood began, the water pooling and zigging and zagging through the cracks in the ground and the ridges of my face, towards the river, through the mountains in my sheets, ever towards the river, pouring out of the clouds and out of my eyes, each purposeless and only leading to stagnant waters to fester around rotting wood and the nothingness of my bed, the laughing nothingness of the darkness that poured through the window and reflected off the mirror a stupid naked girl, in a stupid naked bed, creating her own flood as the real flood waters were rising, and she would have to get dressed and leave before the whole town flooded again and it would take a week for the levies to pump out all this water, *get up, let's go*, her mind screamed, and faced with her own mortality she froze thinking of the rising water searching her out through the cracks, *so this is how I will die*, she thought again, and still louder, *get up, let's go*, and then suddenly, the deafening voice of reality:

He left me to die

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Six hours later I sat on the shore of the sea. Still dripping wet from the torrents that washed away the stars. I dug my toes into the sand and looked out at the black water that merged into the black sky.

The silence was suffocating.

I watched as a star died. One final spectrum of light released into the vast darkness. Then nothing. Then black. No goodbye. No explanation. No should have or would have or could have. It reminded me of footprints in the sand being washed away by the sea. Painfully—slowly—erased. For a moment, as I stared at the memory, I wondered if it had ever been.

I thought about him and his vacant eyes, and how they had said everything I didn't want to hear. And how I was hearing them now in this silence. My mind could not accept that he was gone; it whispered to him in the darkness, "I wanted your tender touches. Sweet Caresses. Warm lips. You to block the cold wind. You to hold me steady. When we met, I was cracked clay and you promised rain.

"But you too were clay. You too needed water. But you were too scared to say it. Too scared to need. To be filled and molded with tender hands. So instead you promised. Used words that were already heavy laden with implications and void of the meaning that can only come from feeling, from love. 'We are' and then nothing. Nothing.

"So we drowned in the frigid waters of goodbye in order to reach tomorrow. One last flicker and then we were erased."

My life was indistinguishable from the darkness. There was no more "I." Random memories slowly grew in my mind, as they always did when I was near the shore, and this time I let them come, one after the other, strange visions of a little girl laughing and dancing, doe-eyed and innocent. Looking back, everything seemed pointless. Each action worthless and working towards a goal that now didn't exist. There was no life for me to go back to and yet I felt nothing. Even the tide rising around me did not alarm me. I sat still and let it come. *I surrender*. This had been the only place I had ever felt at peace: the water lapping at my feet and the childhood memories that filled me with joy and a nameless longing for something I couldn't quite remember. The current slowly pulled me out to sea—time seemed irrelevant out here in the darkness, my only knowledge of it was the rising water and the varying twinkling above me. I smiled: this was a fitting way to go. My entire family had drowned. I took a deep breath, trying to fill my lungs with reassurance, and dove into the sea, finally resting upon the ocean floor.

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I opened my eyes when I realized I could breathe. *Impossible*, I thought, and yet it was. All

manner of life swam by me. Fish. Octopus. Jellies. They smiled at me. "What has taken you so long?" one octopus asked.

I stared blankly back at him.

"Tell me, what is it that you seek?"

I continued to stare.

"Take your time," he smiled.

"I don't know," I replied. My mind drew a blank at the question. *I must be dead. Dead and talking to an octopus.*

"Do you want riches?" he asked.

"No," I replied, "riches can be lost."

"Do you want power?" he continued.

"No," I replied, "power can be taken away."

"Do you want to be loved by all the world?" I paused. "Is that what you would like?" he asked.

"I do not know what love is," I replied.

"Then what do you seek?"

"I guess," I said, "I guess I want what can't be taken away or lost."

He smiled. "That we can give. There is purpose here. There is shelter from the storm. There is validation upon a Rock. There is life in death."

I began to notice the other people around me. The others who had "died" in the floods and gone missing over the years. They also smiled at me. I saw my family. My friends. I was overcome with feeling, with emotion, with a perfect peace. For the first time I could feel the blood warm around my heart. *This must be what home feels like*, I thought. And it was always here, waiting for me. "Yes," I said, "It has taken too long."

As I turned my gaze above, I was entranced by the light dancing upon the surface: glittering ribbons of gold, rubies, and diamonds. Through the jeweled spectrum, I saw the outline of a gigantic golden orb. For a moment I had to avert my eyes. I had never seen so brilliant a light. “What is it?” I asked.

“It is the Great Light,” one fish replied, “the Sun. It is what gives life. The light by which all things are seen and understood. It is God’s love manifested that we may know Him.” The fish paused. I realized then how foolish I looked. I had been trying to swim against the current towards the light. But I was only pushed further away. I finally gave up, and meekly settled again on the ocean floor. The fish continued, “The Sun always shines here.”

“Always?” I asked, “What of the stars?”

“The stars?” the fish laughed. “The stars are His brilliance piercing the darkness. You look stunned, as though the darkness could keep Him out. The stars are like the floods. He is seeking His people out by all means possible. Even the repeated clogging of a festering river.”

I attempted to comprehend this. The fish, finally bored with me, swam away. All those beautiful stars that I had spent hours watching were really this orb breaking into the darkness? And darkness? I didn’t even know that my world was dark. But then again, compared to this brilliance, the greatest fire would barely equate with a match. And the flood waters that we all feared and thought brought death, really held life. There was Something More than the Prince and Hellanus. There was Something Greater calling us home. Every longing and desire I had all my life had been trying to lead me here, to bring me into life. It was then that I noticed a strange image, monstrous and at the same time familiar. It was a distorted face looking at me through the waters. Not at me, but through me. As the current stilled, I recognized it as the man I had loved before. All the memories came rushing back, and for a moment, I wanted to again join him on the shore. Ashamed, I froze and tried to bury myself in whatever darkness

I could find.

“Stop,” another fish said. “Turn and see, he has not left the water’s edge since your death. He followed you out here and watched from a distance as you dove into the sea.”

I turned and looked into his brown eyes. How I loved them once. But his appearance had changed. It was old, haggard. Skin worn thin. Eyes tired. He sat perfectly still, motionless, even though the sand around him was being pulled away by the sea.

“What happened to his face?” I asked.

“That is how everyone looks in the Sun. You did too. Until you died.”

“Will he die too, now?”

“That is his choice. He must acknowledge his need. Let go of the self. There are many that don’t. Many that linger, satisfied with stars when a Sun longs for them just beyond the shore.”

Tears came to my eyes as I thought of him alone. I wanted to go to him. To help him. To hold his hand and lead him into the peace I had now found. The peace I know he too sought—even if he was too scared to admit it.

“Can I go to him? Lead him here?”

“You can lead him here. But go to him? My dear, you now only exist within these waters. We all do. A leaf cannot live apart from the tree. An arm not apart from the body. He called you to Him and you answered. And through death, you can now see the Sun. There is no satisfaction, no peace outside these waters, outside of His love. You know this.”

I nodded. “But why can he not see the Sun?”

“Because the Sun shines too bright, my dear. Far too bright. He can only be seen in reflections, or filtered through water as you see Him now. And that is what we must do, reflect Him. And maybe,

just maybe, those who linger will catch just enough of a glimmer to want more, to seek more. And then, maybe, they too will join us.”

“But what if they don’t?”

It was then that I saw a multitude of distorted faces on the shore. Some talking to each other. Some walking away. Others straining their eyes into the water, scratching their heads at some hinted mystery, some alluring unknown.

It was at those moments that the tide swiftly changed and brought more sand together, swirling the grains to reflect more light. Some of the curious faces were led away by others, and some walked away alone back into the darkness. But a handful stepped forward, and a smile cracked their dry faces as they dissolved into the sea.

“Well you did,” the fish replied. “And there’s always tomorrow.”