

**Between**

A vast flat field adorned with wild flowers of every colour and tall vibrant green grass. A dark tree line; mysterious twisting branches and wrinkled bark. A glistening, inky blue lake, rustling reeds and swaying lily pads. Rabbit holes. Golden wattles exploding out of the dirt. A sky which, even at midday, was filled with stars and wisps of fluffy white clouds, a glorious stream of sunlight.

This wasn't how I expected to greet death.

Although, as it turned out, it wasn't the death I was expecting either. The Lady in Green, so effortless in her motions and as gentle looking as a doe, stood aside my spirit looking down at my body.

A body broken beyond repair. My limbs jutted out at unnatural angles, bones pushing eagerly to escape my skin. My eye sockets were empty yet seemed to be staring at some place far far away. Clothes torn at the seams, and ripped to shreds everywhere else. It appeared a monster had clawed its way through my torso, for it lay with gaping wounds, flaps of skin and slithers of muscle and fat split apart. A rib, protruding into the sky, stark white against the reds and blacks of dried blood. Mixed with grease and sweat and grime. Coated with ash. Becoming slick with fresh blood. Blue and purple knuckles, elbows, knees. Missing clumps of hair, that which remained tangled and dry. Petrol fumes and smoke still lingering in the clothes, on the skin, inside the mouth and nose.

"Do you belong here?" The lady asked.

"No," I replied. I begged.

"No," She agreed. And then she was gone, gliding back to her home beyond the gates of the Beyond.

A long time passed and the sun was slow to set. I was forced to stare at my body, my hideous, destroyed body. The way it crushed the grass beneath and smothered beautiful flowers. They suffocated beneath the weight of my corpse. Blood dripped into the dirt, pooling around my

arms and neck. Drowned the little bugs which crawled along unknowingly. Seeped into the ground, turning dirt into mud and brown into red. When would the Lady in Green return?

*Stupid fucking body.* Vacant, lifeless, yet still the cause for my endless suffering. Control over life had given me complete lack of control in death. Death, ha! If you could call this death. Wasn't I supposed to be reborn? Given a new body, a *good* body, and finally be content? Or rot in the Below, better than this existence... Be tortured, burned, *incinerated*. Nothing I wasn't used to, didn't already inflict on myself. But just to look? Just to stare, unendingly, at the place my body burdened with its gross, pathetic mess. At my body itself, constantly in my vision. At least when I was in it I could look away. Ignore it. Pretend it was something else. Every detail of it was clear to me. Every single speck. Every slight contortion. Every part that failed me and every part I took out my revenge on.

A flash of movement. A person emerged from the tree line, hugging their arms tightly and looking about. A man in a long tan tunic. Loose white shirt underneath. Barefoot. A little bit of foam bubbled on his lips. I watched him cautiously tread his way into the field, and as he took in his surroundings, look straight through me. The Lady in Green appeared and glided to meet him. She took his hand, smiled warmly, and led him to the Beyond.

Death evaded me again. Taunted me again.

You know what? Fuck that man. Was it really that simple? Either you belonged or you didn't... Things clearly didn't change much between the Beyond and the Behind. All that good karma bullshit I'd been force-fed for years on end had turned out to be just as *sour* as it sounded.

Had that man had any *real* troubles in the Behind? I could imagine him in some rich white vegan-friendly weed-induced dreamworld, with a similarly minded group of juice-cleanse flower-crown-filter pansies to go for coastal walks and overpriced brunch with. Of course he *belonged* with

the Lady in Green and the beautiful Beyond. He'd never left. But not me. My body had been riddled with problems then and was still holding me back now. There in the grass.

There in the *fucking green grass*. Bent like blades in the wind. Sickly looking. Discoloured.

The lake, with its soft ripples and deep colour, began to grow. Ever so slowly, day by day, it swallowed the field. Although eerily consuming, it felt natural, like an annual routine, like a change of season. It pulled the vegetation along with it towards me; water lilies, duckweed, fairy moss, lotuses and water clovers. Large white, red and neon blue Siamese Fighting Fish bubbled and danced about the surface with the strangest gentleness, and by the darting streaks of silver and glimpses of fins there must have been many more varieties of fish lingering beneath. I didn't think much of it all, other than admiring the calmness of the water and the majesty of the fish's movements, until it was starting to submerge the fingers on my right hand. They disappeared into the blue, and although they rested at the end of an outstretched and dislocated arm, it took nearly no time at all to reach my shoulder and begin consuming the rest of my body.

*Finally*, I thought, finally it can go Beyond... Or Beneath or Below or wherever the lake led. Away from here. From me. I watched closer as I was submerged. Tiny white fish were surrounding my bare skin, and I spotted a crab entangling itself in my hair like it would seaweed. The tendrils of clothing that remained on my body were easily drawn by some mysterious current and floated away with the motions of eels. Then the sight of flesh was gone from view. Blue replaced red. Greenery replaced dead. I occupied myself with watching and categorising the fish of the lake once I'd spotted more than just the Siamese Fighting Fish playing about the flowers and the moss and the clovers.

It didn't go Beyond.

And it didn't go Below.

Winter passed in a crisp white blur of late-leaving leaves brushing the frozen surface of the lake and soft snow prancing down to meet them. Several bodies passed through and the Lady in Green, even more graceful with every visit, greeted them with an air of excitement. I almost started to miss my own body, it had been mine to cower over and glare down at, and if it was dropped like a discarded rag doll into this heavenly field then I could at least convince myself there must be something more sinister about this place. But I had nothing to do but wait and watch.

Spring thawed everything and the blooming waterlilies started to retreat. I noticed the tiny blades of grass peeking over the water line and soon my body surfaced too. It didn't look swollen and bloated and blue like I had expected. The fish hadn't taken large chunks of flesh as I had hoped. I looked... clean. The streaks of oil and grease had been washed away, my hair was just peacefully floating around my head like a halo, and my clothes had been entirely stripped away. The gashes were still ugly and raw and unsettlingly open, but there was none of that violent movement I associated with them...

*Shove, yank, snap, pull*

... only a relaxing slow sway from side to side in the gentle ripples of the lake. Slowly my body was brought back to me and the inky blue water slipped away.

And the field erupted with life.

The carnations rose up first, growing at an inhuman speed, spreading bright red amongst the tall grass, followed by Sweet Peas of a slightly darker hue. A couple patches of peonies sprung up here and there. Then the asters and verbena and delphinium in all their deep shades of purple, indigo primroses, and the darkest coral bells and hellebore, all growing amongst each other. Morning glory. Forget me nots. Hydrangeas whose petals imitated the lake.

The buttercups waited a little longer to join the festivity of Spring, and just when I thought that was all, pansies of all colours sought to fill in the gaps. A couple sprouted from where my eyes should've been. I watched it all in amazement. I admired the colours, the richness of them. Beautiful. I watched them move as one as the breeze wandered through.

And then I realised.

It wasn't the discolouration and marring of my body which stood out against this beauty, but the patches of fleshy pink untouched skin. The flowers matched perfectly with the blues and purples of my bruises, and the reds of my cuts and gashes. The warm yellows made my jagged nails and remaining teeth look so much less vile.

The Lady in Green appeared once more by my side, but no questions followed her arrival. She simply smiled at the field, her eyes glancing over my body like I was any other patch of grass and flowers. After a moment I followed her gaze to a woman emerging from the trees. Against the field she looked pale and washed out, dressed in dirty whites and greys. Her hair was slicked back, and her sleeves rolled up to the elbow. Soot covered her hands. She trudged towards us, stomping down the flowers into the dirt. Sweating profusely.

The Lady in Green glided forward to meet her.

"Do you belong here?" She asked.

The woman spared less than a glimpse at her surrounds. "Nah, don't reckon so." She hacked up a cough and spat.

To the Lady's credit, she didn't flinch. She motioned to the closest wall of trees, which grew darker and darker by the second. Tendrils of thick black smoke unfurled their way onto the field,

draining the flowers of their vibrancy. It was as if that single section of this world had turned to greyscale. The Man in Black strode confidently into view.

“You belong with me, then?” He asked, wiping grime from his forehead and slowly cleaning it off on his tatty suit.

*A slow whine of dry gears, coal burn, screech*

The woman looked at him, then herself. “Suppose so.”

The Man in Black offered his elbow to her and they disappeared into the trees. Then all of a sudden the grey was gone and the air felt light and fresh.

The Lady in Green turned back to me. “Do you belong there?”

“Definitely not.”

She nodded in satisfaction and glided away into the distance and out of sight.

Many more came for the Man in Black. Hoards of them. Traipsing out of the forest dressed in their patchwork clothes and slick with sweat. Heavy soled boots crushing the flowers beneath them. Ash thick in the air. I’d gotten so used to the sweet fragrance of the field that the petrol and smoke and burning rubber that I’d brought with me lingering on my body smelt disgusting and vile and foreign. I didn’t want any of those dirty people near me or my body.

The Man in Black had to physically haul bodies back into his *pit*, pulling limp arms and bony legs, dragging hollow faces through the mud. Their wounds were grey, rotting flesh, and their bruises sickly yellow, green and brown. Guts trailing behind them. Puss oozing. Splintered bones creating tracks in the dirt. Bodies as broken as mine. Uglier. Sickening.

Then they stopped, and my chest deflated as if in a sigh of relief.

As the Man in Black’s tendrils retreated, the Between’s fauna begun to emerge. Twitching noses popping out of the ground, tentative paws stepping out from the trees, flashes of feathers

amongst the leaves. I spotted a Capybara leading a group of ducks to the lake's edge for a swim. Deer started grazing not five paces from my body. Bees enjoyed my flowers. Dragonflies zipped between the petals. Two skylarks glided down to my body, and the smaller of the two started picking about my hair. As I watched with mild interest, it started rearranging the clumps into a sort of nest, with the sticks and straw the larger skylark brought back for her. It took them half a day of work to morph my hair into a functioning birds nest for the night.

I started to notice more little crawlers in the grass; spotted ladybirds and centipedes, furry spiders. A gorgeous yellow viper slithered its way past me. The sky slowly filled with colour as more birds arrived to soak up the springtime sun.

A dog, with the purest white fur and softest blue eyes, trotted over to my body. He sniffed my hand. It felt familiar...

*wet face, warmth, safety*

He curled up by my side, sniffing at the lizards which scampered past with a playful curiosity. As the sun fell a chill set in, and I could see the little goosebumps start to form on my skin. The dog shifted closer for warmth. As the minutes dragged on, more and more creatures found warmth by my side. We slept until the glorious sunrise appeared over the lake.

The Lady in Green came back to me, a gorgeous white mare at her side.

"Do you belong here?" She asked.

"I want to," I replied. "I should..." I looked back down at my body, still broken beyond repair, "but I can't."

She smiled at me. "You can. Or," she motioned to the patch of dark woods the Man in Black usually appeared, "you can't."

Suddenly I was no longer looking across from her. Instead I was looking up, and she looked down at my body... at me. I didn't feel pain, nor emptiness, just weakness. I was worried the

ground would crumble away and let me fall. I tested my fingers curling and uncurling, and felt soft fur. I turned my head right and left and felt the nest tugging lightly at my scalp. It felt good to be back. Relieving. Safe. Warm.

The Lady in Green held out a hand to me. "It's time for you to go Beyond."

I tried to lift my hand to her, but I couldn't muster the strength. The muscle had withered away. I struggled, sweated, trying to just hover it above the ground. The dog stood, and nuzzled his snout under my hand to help lift it. The Lady in Green reached down to grasp it, but made no effort to pull me to my feet.

"Please," I said. It was not for the Lady in Green.

The skylarks flittered from their nest, singing, and called birds from across the field to me. They grasped clawfuls of hair, lifting my head off the grass. The deer came over and supported my back, as all of the smaller animals who had spent their night beside me propped my knees and hips off the ground. I pushed my feet down to ground myself as I rose to stand face to face with the Lady in Green.

With one arm slung over her mare, the other swinging by my side, lightly brushing the dog's fur, I forced myself to walk. It felt right. *I* felt right. I watched the blue and purple flowers brush past my knees and smiled.

We passed by the lake and I could see my reflection. It was a change to see myself as one being. Shocking. I was seeing a smile on my face, my bruised eyeless face, I looked joyous. Seeing my arm swing in time to the birdsong which accompanied our journey. Seeing the dog's tail wag at my side. The way the flowers and blades of grass bounced back after I lifted each foot, as if I had never been there. I turned around to see that flat patch of ground behind me, slightly stained red, to show I had. Then I greeted death.