

“A MOURNING AMONG THE TREES”

I was only eleven years old when You lured my sister and I into Your depths. The air that day was boiling hot and thick with flies. Quiet and patient, You watched me and my sister from our bedroom window as we huddled close to Mom’s old metal desk fan. You waited for the moment when I cracked the window ajar, hoping it might alleviate the heat. As I rested my chin on the window’s ledge, I felt Your breath tickle my cheeks, tempting me to push the glass further up.

“No,” my sister said, no quieter than a dormouse. “We’re not allowed.”

I let out a huff. “What Mom doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

Mom warned us of the forest that surrounded our home. She would tell us stories about the dangers of what lurked inside. We weren’t allowed near the trees without her by our side, ready to pull us back by our shirt collars. Earlier that morning, when my sister and I dragged our feet downstairs, sweaty from another hot night, she promptly gave us an explicit order.

“Neither of you are to go outside today,” she told us. “I don’t even want you opening the windows, do you hear me?”

Her words were coarse and heavy against her delicate sing-song voice. She was a kind woman and a gentle mother but when it came to the forest, Mom turned into some kind of wild beast.

I was always the curious one, to her dismay, and would seemingly never be satisfied until I knew every answer in the world. I cocked my head to the side like a curious bird and asked, “Why not?”

My sister, three years my younger and loyal to my every action, nodded in agreement.

“Wouldn’t it be nicer with the windows, Mama?” she asked, echoing my interest.

“No,” Mom replied harshly. “This is what it wants. It’s been waiting for a day like this. It will lure you in with a sweetness in its breeze but you mustn’t listen.” She took the two of us by our shoulders and pulled us in close. “Do you two understand?”

Though we nodded obediently and gave her our solemn word, it had become too hot of a day for honesty. You knew that. You were watching us then, too. Mom’s warning rang out to You like a challenge. I was too young at the time. I didn’t understand You like Mom did. I hadn’t learned yet what it meant to truly fear You.

Trapped in an oven of a bedroom, I huffed again and spun around to face my sister. “Wouldn’t it be nicer outside?”

I know now that those words were not truly my own. They were Yours, fed to me by the gentle summer breeze. My sister blinked back at me, too tempted to argue back. She trusted me.

You welcomed our bare feet with warm, soft blades of grass and sung a hymn for us with the rustle of Your trees. You encapsulated all that people fantasize about when they think back on being a young child living in the woods. There was no fear and nothing to worry about. Hell, even the blazing heat didn’t bother us anymore for a moment.

We were so close to Your grasp, all You needed was to seal the deal and snap Your jaws shut around us. You blew out a breeze so strong it gusted the sheep-like cloud out from in front of the searing sun. My sister and I were much closer to the forest, where You had spent centuries elegantly weaving a blanket of branches and leaves to serve as a cooling roof.

Without stopping to think, we drifted into the forest edge. I should have known to turn back as my heart snagged on every breath, aching as it slammed against my chest. We had never actually been inside the forest before. Mother would never allow it.

“It’s nice,” my sister said with a giggle in her voice as she traced the bark of a thick, moss-ridden tree.

My head whipped back towards the house. It was no more than 40-odd feet away yet it looked so tiny from where I stood. The words “We should head back” were hot on my tongue, ready to spill once I grabbed my sister and

ran us both inside. Before I could get even a letter out, though, I heard footsteps trailing away from me as my sister toddled off in curiosity and I nervously scrambled behind to catch up.

A gasp echoed throughout Your belly and my feet took to running, hurrying right up to my sister's side as she stood still in shock and awe. You had given us a beautiful gift, do You remember? You had laid out the perfect little pool for the two of us. Your water had a greenish hue from years of algae buildup and debris but it was still clear enough to see the shallow edges. It was much too deep to see the bottom of, though. Oddly, it was the size of a small pond but looked to run as deep as the ocean.

"This is perfect!" My sister said in excitement. "It's so hot out, can't we go for a swim? Please?"

"But... Mom-"

I wasn't fast enough. She was already kicking through the water, all innocent and gleeful. I followed after her, stuck in limbo between dragging her back to the house or letting out a breath and splashing around alongside her.

I never should have opened that window that day. I never should have gone outside, or ventured into the woods, or let my toes dip into Your water. You had done this so many times before, drawing curious wanderers into Your reach and luring them deeper and deeper where their screams could not be heard.

My ankle throbs at the memory of Your shadowy grip coiled tight around my skin. There's a reason Your pond was so deep. I wonder if it even has a bottom. I couldn't know for sure. I never found it that day but my sister did.

I stand at the edge of the old lawn. Mangled roots from Your trees sit at my feet like teeth, ready to grind me into dust if I dared let myself trip. You grew angry after that day, I can see it in your ugly black trees and piles upon piles of dead, decaying leaves. You hadn't expected me to slip from Your hands and rush back to the house, my cries for help coming out in wet, sloppy sobs. By then, Mom knew her youngest daughter was dead and gone.

"Pack," Mom said to me quietly. "We're leaving tonight."

The house behind me is nothing but old, moldy rubble. No one dared buy it after the tantrum You threw when Mom and I left. The sky turned pitch black and raindrops the size of pebbles pelted down on the windshield of the car. As Mom drove away that night, I remember hearing a distinctive crackling far off in the distance. The noise was followed by a loud booming crash that sent me ducking my head between my knees. I know now what that sound was. You had uprooted the several hundred year old tree beside the front door and thrown its thick, solid body against the house, ensuring we could never return to that home again.

A lot has changed. Mom is dead now. After her funeral I stopped feeling anything at all. I truly had nothing left. I lost my job, lost my apartment, and lost my girlfriend. Everything and everyone ran far from me as I let my mind slip away, leaving my skull a hollow shell. During the reception after the funeral, long before I lost my job, a coworker of mine offered me the information of a grief counselor near my old apartment. He wasn't very cheap, so I only went a few times, but during each meeting the topic of my late mother rarely came up. We always spoke of my sister. Or, at least, I always spoke of her.

Though our talks helped a little, the most important thing my counselor said to me was during my last appointment. By then I was single again and had been let go from my job just the day before. I didn't tell him any of that. Nor did I tell him I was being evicted because I had spent all my money on our meetings. He could tell something was different that day, though. I think he knew it was the last time we'd talk because he finally gave me a call to action. He told me I needed to properly grieve what I had lost. I needed to go back home, back to Your pond, and say goodbye.

My sister never got a funeral, did You know that? There was no body to bury anyway. My counselor told me that it might feel good to erect a little memorial for her. Maybe I'll say a few words, recall the old days, or joke about how the gap in her front teeth would whistle when she laughed. I'll give her a proper send off after all these years. Then, I'll be fixed somehow.

I don't believe that. Maybe my counselor was right about coming back home but I don't think he realized what being here would do to me. I came to say goodbye, but not to my sister. You know as well as I do that there is nothing left for me in this world. On that hot summer day, You marked me for death. That's why I'm so hollow. You stole my soul in those waters but I rescued my body. But what's flesh with no life? What's a little girl without her

sister? The only time I've ever been able to feel anything at all is when I think about her. Being back here has shown me a very simple truth: I have nothing to live for without her. I want to be with her forever. It's the only way I'll ever be happy again.

A thick layer of fog coats Your ground, hiding branches and roots as I stumble deeper inside. Though years have passed, I feel as though I've walked to that pond every day of my life. I know the journey by heart somehow. The wind shrills through Your leaves, hitting my face with a surprising softness. It reminds me of the window. You still remember me after all this time.

Further ahead, the pond's now pitch black water sits like an ink stain on the ground. Dead leaves and bushels of moss float along the surface but drift away to the opposite ends of the water as I step closer. Like a reversed magnet, the debris, the black filth, and the fog all whip away from me. The air becomes warm and the pond trickles back to its old greenish color.

I'm a little girl again, fearful yet excited to play in a pond I had no idea was behind my house. If I shut my eyes, I can hear my sister's laughter echoing off of the trees. For the first time in what feels like forever, I smile. My sister is in that water somewhere and I'm going to find her. I don't care how deep I have to go. We will be reunited.

You soften around me as I kick off my shoes, leaving them neatly resting on the damp dirt bank. You've been angry for so long, just as I've been grieving. We've both suffered from that day. You, hungry for my body to return to Your grasp and nurture Your soil, and me, desperate to be a little girl one more time, playing alongside my sister on a hot summer day.

The water is at my ankles now. I know the next step I take will plunge me into that bottomless pit. For a moment, I hesitate. I wonder how many people have died here. How many bones lie at the bottom of Your pond? I think back to Mom and how deeply she feared You. For the longest time, I always wondered why she didn't leave sooner. Why would she raise two daughters by herself in a forest she was terrified to go near?

I understand now. Because I fear You, too. I fear You more than anything. But there's a piece of me lost in Your depths, locked away never to be seen again. I can't let that go.

Did You have a piece of Mom, too? Was she a little girl once, running foolishly through Your wicked labyrinth? Maybe, if I sink deep enough, I'll find her somewhere in Your depths. We can be a family again.

We will all be together forever.