**Laura**

I had called in sick that day. It was during the summer, when the sun was bright amidst the white clouds and the wind blew through the trees. The air was hot and humid when I arrived at the bus stop, the decrepit sign showing years of wear against the harsh weathers that permeated Georgia. I stood near the empty sidewalk as I waited for the bus.

This was a terrible idea.I looked around, wiping my sweaty palms against my jeans. Missing a day of work was not a smart idea, but nothing I did at that moment felt completely smart. It wasn’t difficult to take a day off so that I could visit my family, but I didn’t want to tell any of my coworkers. Besides, vising them wasn’t what I was afraid of. I still felt dazed and lucid, as if I wasn’t completely awake and all that had happened so far was a manifestation of my mind; a dream*.*

I stared at the trees on the opposite side of the road, the leaves swaying in the calm breeze. Below one of the trees stood a single rose bud, it’s petals a beautiful shade of dark red. Unlike any other plants or trees around it, the rose stood unmoving. I thought it was strange that such a flower could bloom alone, especially when it was surrounded by a harsh environment where there was nothing but tall trees and dried grass. My bus was arriving just then, a looming figure in the distance. I took out my wallet as it came closer, regret in my mind. I paid the fare, and got on the vehicle. I took a seat near the back as the bus moved again. I was the only passenger.

The sky and trees blurred together as the bus drove on.Everything seemed to move in a fast direction, blurring and mixing with each other, too quick for me to handle. I found myself thinking back about how it used to be, when everything seemed simple and without consequence.I miss hearing laughter. Although they were never mine, I longed to hear something real, even if it meant that I would be the one to get hurt again*.* It had been normal then; they would gang up and beat me even if I only glanced at them. But I was used to it.I knew deep down that what I had done was right, but looking at the moving scenery before me, I wanted to take everything back and become a young child again*.* And I knew thatit was my mistake. Seventeen years later and I still can’t accept it. Slowly, the regret grew into fear as I looked on out the window. With my reflection looking back at me, I turned away. I was getting close to my stop, back to my home.

But I was still scared. I couldn’t even fathom setting foot on those old familiar brick steps, the large wooden door that would creak every time it opened. I knew I had to do it. But a different place came into my mind as the bus came to a halt, the driver announcing that this was the final stop. I got off my seat and thanked the driver. “Don’t see much folks come here often nowadays. You local?” he asked. I fumbled with the sleeves of my shirt. I could feel the driver’s gaze as I racked my mind for an answer.

“Well you just take care now, son.”

“Thank you,” I murmured back.

The sky was blue as I stepped out of the vehicle, the blazing sun shining directly on to my face. I looked around the bus stop; many trees and wild plants were growing around the surrounding fences, or what was left of them. Most fences were torn apart, vines and flowers growing through the ragged pieces of metal. There were virtually no buildings to be seen in the distance, except for a narrow path that hid amongst the garden of wild plants. I followed the path, pushing away branches and leaves that seemed almost too keen to smack me in the face.

For what seemed like hours, I hiked through the path, unable to see any buildings or roads except for the wild shrubbery. Perspiration formed on my face and back, the heat unforgiving as ever. As I turned left, I noticed small clusters of white flowers growing around the area; each plant was small and bundled together, like white lace. As I walked further ahead I noticed a big, old looking building covered in moss and vines.

The entire area was claimed by nature; the small white flowers surrounded the building and remaining space like a field of fresh snow. I recognized this place. It was a youth drama center our town had built many years ago for teens to go to after school. Not far off would be “Dick’s Convenience Store” where I used to get cream soda every Wednesday after school. I was always curious about the theatre, but my mother told me that “Only homosexuals would dress up and pretend to be something they’re not.”

The old building stood tall and wide. It looked abandoned, with its grey cracking tiles bricks and chipped roof. I couldn’t help but walk closer. The handles were rusty but to my surprise the doors creaked open, sunlight streaming onto the dark concrete floor. I stepped into the dark building, my hands still on the rails. It must have been abandoned for years…

In the middle of the remains of what was most likely a stage stood two figures, a girl and a boy. They were dancing on a single table, their movements smooth and fluid as they entwined arms and threw back their legs. A single blue light shone on the two children, an almost eerie glow that casted huge dancing shadows onto the walls. I walked forward slowly, moving around the cushioned seats that filled most of the room. The girl and boy continued to dance, oblivious to my presence. I stood, a few rows from the front of the stage, and watched them. The girl had short black hair; she was wearing a flowing white dress, and a crown of white flowers adorned her head. Just like the ones outside*.* The young boy was a head shorter. He wore a white tee shirt with suspenders and slacks, the pant legs slouching on his shoes. They twirled aimlessly together, eyes closed as they swayed to the soundless music. Shuffling once more they stopped, and hugged each other.

Then they slowly turned around and looked at me.

“Welcome, mister,” said the girl. “Did you like our dance?” I gulped as I looked back between the two of them. *Was it rude for me not to clap?* “I did.” I managed to reply.

“My name is Anne. And this one here,” she motioned the boy, “is Daniel. He doesn’t talk very much though,” I nodded in acknowledgment, unable to speak. I felt as if they were scrutinizing my appearance, despite the girl’s bright smile. I felt foolish. They were just children. “Well anyways,” she continued, “what are you doing here mister? No one is supposed to know about this place except me and Danny.”

“I’m… visiting family.”

“Oh, that sounds like fun!”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“But what are you doing *here?*”

“I don’t know, honestly.”

“Well in that case…” she pouted her lips, “would you like to dance with us?”

I looked into the mirror as I finished applying makeup. I used the only spare thing I had: a tube of red lipstick. It did not do much to cover the hollow of my eyes or my jaw, but it felt right. Inside the fitting room closet were arrays of different costumes, but a particular airy one piece had caught my eye. It was light pink and silky to the touch. Small lace details ran down the sleeves, and the collar was high enough to cover my neck. On the vanity table lay a rose brooch. It was a bright red color, its petals opened and bloomed. Pinning the brooch onto the black scarf wrapped around my head, I couldn’t help but to question myself.

What am I doing here? Should I just go?

My reflection told me otherwise. All the times I had felt sad and confused rushed to me. Everything felt like it weighted in, and out. Perhaps it was the theatre, the flowers around me, but I felt safe. I knew that there would be no more consequences anymore, that it was okay*.*

I heard the soft melodies that echoed through the halls as I made my way to the stage. Daniel was on the opposite side, playing on a large piano. Anne stood on top of the table as she softly tapped her feet to the music. The lights above shone yellow this time, illuminating her white flower crown. I closed my eyes and drifted to the sound.

I swayed step by step until I reached Anne; she took my hand, and I climbed onto the table. It was not very tall, but it felt like I had been lifted onto a grand stage. I could feel the melody of the piano ring through the walls and bounce back and forth in the room; our shadows danced wildly as if the sun was about to set. We started to bend our arms and legs to the music; we sashayed and stomped when the beat got louder.

Every prance, flounce and trudge felt as if I was letting go. My arms and legs moved of their own accord; they reached and searched the space around me. The specs of dust that fell above us looked like tiny stars as we danced underneath it. It was as if we danced through the universe. I marveled at every move I made, every sound there was. And slowly, we moved gently against the music once more as it grew quieter, and raised our arms for one final pose.

Anne smiled, and looked up at me. “Did you enjoy the dance?”

“I did. Thank you.”

Her eyes widened as a look of concern flashed across her face. “I can’t believe I never asked you. What’s your name?”

I smiled for the first in what felt like years.

“My name is Laura.”

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