

The Tragedy of the Wayward Daughter

I've been waiting here for as long as I can remember.

I do everything I can to forget there's an immense forest just behind me. Pretty as they can be, I was always terrified of forests. It's the unknown of what lurks within, I think – it's truly harrowing.

Perhaps it could be said it's a fear of that, the concept of the unknown, rather than the forest itself? Maybe both are true. All I know is that I fought my way through it, broken and fraught with desperate hope. All to wait here. Wait and wait and wait.

I shudder every time I look back, to see the vast depth of it – and then, it's as if I can hear the entrancing calls and songs of the will o' wisps I'd heard spoken of by the villagers; lulling me in, bidding I retrace the steps my journey offered me, as if the forest ground loathes the progress it allowed me. It's then I force my eyes forward in a snap of sudden awareness, praying to the Lord I do believe has forgotten me, forsaken me, or may have never existed, to let the next one passing by offer my lost soul help.

My only company takes the form of the rustling trees on the perimeter; rare are the steps I take to keep its yawning advance in line with me. The ones that stand aside me are but young promises of what they'll become – beautiful, but soon to be committed to the ranks of the deeper soldiers. They have a long time to go, as I've seen with the others I once stood besides, but I believe they'll make it. Ill fate can't befall all living creatures – I still refuse to believe there is only evil in this world.

There's an innocence to these younglings, my friends, that I adore and envy, both. Foolish as it may seem to begrudge a tree of its existence, as stationary and silent as they are. Yet, they bunch together proud and unified - regardless of shape and strength, they're all as one. A family who refuse turn on one another. *Foolish*, it may not be.

As much as the world around me changes in to unfamiliar, confusing settings – these trees are my constant. My anchor. My everything.

I often look side to side, and take in their majesty – from sprawling earthy roots that coalesce and thrust up in thickening trunks, before they burst off in to limbs that bunch at the blossoming tips with leaves that tickle at the skies. And, oh, I admire how they stand, tall and lithe; those very leaves following the example of the soon forgotten elders that creep, endlessly, all the way in to the heart of the forest which, at one point in the time-effaced past well before my birth, was but a wayward sapling.

In the summer, they boast the vivid and potent dark and bright greens – creating a vast unreachable field that only birds and their limitless command of branch and wind can enjoy. Then, as the sun becomes wearisome and lazy, the cold wins over and suffuses a tincture of yellows, reds and fiery oranges – as if the trees fall ill, like my sweet mother once did, and their burning fever appears as thus. All before the snows come, denuding the helpless sentinels completely of their beauty, so that they become crooked and gnarled; snapping in spontaneity like shadowy lightning bolts. As the winter steals their natural adornments, it deigns to offer in its stead, the powdery, glistening blanket which only freezes – never warms. And then, after endless nights in which they complain with groaning clacks and cracks, in the face of the adversity they've suffered, the defiant and resilient bright greens bloom back in to existence – showing that every time they will be reborn.

I plead for that strength of resilience. What I would do to feel the wiles of the seasons again, even if only just to shiver as those cruel gems of cold peppered on my ever-raw and bruised scalp, but I know that will never be the case. To wish to be like them... *Foolish*, it is not.

This process happens endlessly, and a few cycles will see the younger join the ranks of their ancestors, and then they interlock, and weave a solid canopy with the others – like a granddaughter knitting a blanket with her grandmother – until the shade spreads, the forest takes another tentative step forward, and I, too, move to avoid condemning myself. Then, I take to watching the next generation grow, and together we wait, and wait, and wait.

I lost count of how many people have passed by the main road. On the day I left my home, I thought perhaps they would send a search party for me. But, as my village diminished to a humble bustle of buildings, until swallowed up by the dimming horizon, I saw nor heard even the hint of a whisper for the wayward daughter. Might be my father was expecting it, after the things he did.

I try to find sense in his actions. Perhaps he turned his mind from god when my mother passed, and in the melancholic vacancy, an echo of Satan took root, and much like my friends, grew slowly and steadily until all that was left within his thought were crooked thoughts of woven malice and hate.

Maybe the likeness in my visage to my mother's was a mockery, a taunt – and he wanted to beat her beauty out of me so that it would no longer be a torture to him. But then, the other stuff he did – the way he took me – made me believe perhaps he sought to mould me as a replacement. Within the annals of his mind grew a confliction and affliction, in which he doted and despised my very presence, and the confusion spilled out in the horrors he permitted.

The night I ran was the worst it had ever been. I could smell the ale thick on his breath. Smell the coppery scent of what meagre coins he held within the tavern, betting as was likely. He was glistening with sweat, and drenched in anger. I heard the muffled shuffle from the other side of the door before the fumbling of metal latch on hasp, and I tensed as the door boomed open – framing the demon he had become in the oaken opening; the slithers of the village around and behind him remained silent, allowing him to enter and do what he will.

He was rougher than he'd ever been before, on all accounts – and more drunk, too. This night both elements were at play, the love and the hate, and thus, I was subject to the whims of all. As he tired himself out with sudden blows until my wounds wept and forceful thrusts until my tears streamed, I receded in to my mind, thinking of the times I would go flower picking in the distant forest with my mother – the memory and happiness of dawdling at the forest edge was the only antidote of purity for such an evil. Before long, the exertion and alcohol had cradled him to a doze. And so, I dressed myself, took his prized leather coat- though, a look back at him, sprawled on the bed as he was, filled me with guilt and so I left it. I crept back, as silently as I could, silencing the screaming complaints of my muscles and stifling the claret sobs of my flesh, and gently placed the threadbare linen blanket over his form, so as to keep the chill away.

Then, with a prayer for his health, future and disposition, I fled. I knew not where my feet would take me, but perhaps the memory of those flowers was enough to compel me in to the forest. I was always warned to never enter too deep, for the fear of predators both four-legged and two, or malevolent sprites and wisps that may be awaiting easy prey. But, stay I could not. I knew I could make it through within a day, at most a day and a half. I could then reach out to the dirt road, and follow it to one of the nearby villages. Find an apprenticeship with a florist, using the knowledge of herbs and petals my mother had gifted me. Anything would be kinder than the current.

The wind was howling that night. The fury of my father's conscience following me. I could picture in the imagination of a child, his anger in the form of a wraith dogging me – the vision of it tattered and torn at the sides like his sick mind - flying above and behind with a countenance of pure disgust, swerving and strafing and darting about the reaching limbs, loosing screaming howls with the wind, and harassing those leaves I've grown to love so as to

make them whisper and hiss their vehement detestation for the girl who left her father – like they never would.

The leather sandals I wore were little protection against the sudden jagged rocks, and sporadic brambles that angrily bit at me. My night dress billowed behind me, and was constantly clawed at by low hanging branches, and sudden growths. Every rip I heard, only spurred me on. I felt snagging and sharpened twigs cling on, and join me in my escape, often dropping in to the sandals to begin gnawing at the soles of my feet, yet, I only ran faster.

The beaten bruising and wounds my father had left me recruited an army of slashes and slices in the forest, and I could feel the wind lick at their cold wetness tasting my misfortune, but I didn't stop. I couldn't stop. I wept and wended through the meandering thickets, hoping my silent prayers could break through to the foliage-blocked sky above and my words would patter at the kindness of the Lord - begging for aid, for help, for mercy.

I tried to not think of the possibility that the wolves could be padding behind me. Silent and agile, another species who would kill any like me, a deserter. The imagined paternal wraith declared allegiance with these spectral feral beasts; shadows lurking behind silhouetted trunk and blackened thought, racing in a pack, waiting for the moment I would trip or falter, so they could fall on me in their loyal pack, and as they eviscerated my cruel flesh, clutched at my throat and ripped it out so that my life would bleed out of me, I would look in to the ghastly face of my father, and taste irony of how I would long for his vengeance as a kindness in comparison.

But, the night soon brightened with the hints of dawn, and as the sun clawed its way in to the sky, the sheer exhaustion I felt demanded an audience, and made itself known. My pace had slowed, and I was supporting my flight by stumbling from one tree, to the next – the morning's chill clung tight to the bark, but it paled in comparison to the ice within me.

I continued, half asleep, slumped double to the brink of collapse – stricken with chafing thirst and a commanding hunger.

Then in the distance, like one of the kind dreams my younger mind possessed a long time ago, I saw the edge of the forest, and I believed my prayers had been heard. God in his providence had warded the malevolent spirits, and the primal beasts, away – allowing me to safely pass. Ahead, the trees were giving way, descending in numbers and age, to the very same lithe and youthful ranks I now stand beside. I pushed my limits, as I could now see the dirt road, bathed in the bright sun of the bitter morning.

Until I reached the perimeter, and collapsed to all fours, finally. Dehydrated as I was, my anguish found some reservoir deep within my pain, to sprinkle my sadness on the dusty path – mayhaps it wanted to water the ground, as a token of gratitude for letting me through.

I cannot say how long I stayed there, broken and heaving with sobs. The pure heart-wrenching emotion was akin to the loss I felt when I saw my mother lying flat and cold, void of the rosy blush that often painted her cheeks; the same way it did mine, blessed or accursed as that shared trait was. It was a torture to feel, yet I could do nothing but. I was shuddering with cold – even when the sun's gentle warmth had caused the early chill to ebb away – and hating myself for leaving, loving myself for my bravery. Until, in the distance, the creaking of a carriage's wheels. *My salvation!* I thought, and blessed god again, and again and again. The voice wouldn't come, so I burned it to the forefront of my heart and brain both – sheer joy in his divinity. I loved him. I loved him. I loved him. *Foolish*, I was.

I know not what had twisted the mind of the rider, but to see a young woman hunched, beaten and on the brink of collapse – his thoughts were not fuelled by mercy. No, perhaps my father's wraith had truly followed, and took possession of this man just as the devil had of him all that

time ago. It must be so, because he grabbed me by the scalp with such a ferocity that I felt the twig laden hair rip out. As he dragged me back in the bustle of trunks, I couldn't even scream; my throat was so raw, my soul so bruised. And thus defeated, the acts I characterised as my father's evil were carried out by a stranger I believed to be my saviour.

But, unlike my father, they did not bear any lingering mote of love for me, and so bled out the last breaths of my life, with their puncturing of my lungs.

The pain ceased; all physical sensation did. And I knew my body was no longer the prison for my spirit. And, distraught and lost as I was, I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to turn back to the village – I could not face the forest again. I didn't want to step away from my body. I could only wait, and wait, and wait.

As the leaves of the marching seasons fell atop me, as the insects and animals feasted, and as the ground took ownership of my rotting body in what was the first embrace I'd had in a long time, the dirt roads changed. Now, solid black rivers course from the distance, pass by me, and stretch in to the horizon. I saw it being planted by strange men and gigantic yellowed beasts that terrified me. They had the power of earthquakes at will, the ground cracking open as the earth shattered beneath their might.

I hid behind the trees whenever they arrived. Watching and shivering, aghast at such a sight. Maybe if I stood out and called for help, they would have seen me and helped - commanding such power as they did. Or perhaps they bore the evil of the men who beat me, and could reach through the veil to further my torment.

One of them, I believe, saw me. He froze, carrying a weapon I've never laid eyes on before or since, and stared directly at me. I couldn't respond, but just stared back – half hidden by trunk and shade. Until he shook his head, muttered in a strange dialect and returned to his fellows.

The carriages still pass by, but now, they're tamed monsters that thrust before them spears of torches, though no crackle of flames, that I knew once to bring warmth, do I see. They pass without horses, perhaps possessed or imbued with dark arts that keep me here. Some of them are so enormous, that I see my friends sway and shudder at their passing. And though the terror is prominent within me, I stand there still, believing one of them may offer me my salvation.

They grunt as loud as any bear, and sometimes I hear a clangour of what I believe to be a queer and strange music screaming from within them. They often pass by at startling speed, ignoring my outstretched hand begging to be saved. If that is even possible.

Sometimes, the strange folk within catch sight of me, and curiously, in their armoured carriages, seem more terror stricken, more afraid of me than I am of them. They have no room for cruel intention it seems, but only a terror I imagine is what I felt during my flight.

Once or twice, I'm overwhelmed with an intense guilt as I hear a muffled scream from within, and witness them lose control of these horrid beasts and nearly veer off the solid black below, and smash in to trees. Only to regain steadiness, and speed off in to the distance with their glowing red tails to blind me.

As of yet, none have ever stopped for me. But, fool that I am, I hope and hope.

Maybe one day, god will remember this wretched wayward daughter who was heinous enough to abandon her father.

Until then, I'll wait, and wait, and wait.