

Oleander

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She fell to Earth like an anvil in a cartoon. The crater she left vandalized the middle of the highway. Her dark hair disguised her face when she sprang out onto the shoulder, but no one could miss the red scar that wrapped around her side and spread like a river delta across her back. The woman scrambled over the barrier and into the woods.

My eyes followed the animalistic woman as she darted out of view. Dozens of cars in my lane ground to a halt behind me, their drivers slamming their horns as if the sound would carry my old black Jetta forward. I pulled off to the side to allow them to pass. Patchy grass and beautiful wild oleanders with pink flowers lined the road.

“Jackass!” I heard as a BMW whizzed by.

I moved nervously when I parked my car. The seatbelt felt restrictive along my torso, my body stuck against the car seat as my mind already left to follow the female cryptid. Finally, I broke free from my bonds and carefully rounded my car. Plenty of middle fingers and some concerned faces greeted me behind windows. I mirrored the woman and hopped over the concrete barrier. I was in a trance. *How far could she have gotten?* I wondered. *Probably not very. Where was she off to anyway?*

The highway sliced through farmland and wooded areas, and there was a grassy ditch just beyond the barrier before the wall of trees. I stumbled downhill and tripped.

Just as I was gaining momentum running uphill, an invisible force knocked me down from the side.

She.

She was there by my side on the ground when I caught my breath. I frantically searched for my glasses in the grass, but they were gone. She was staring directly into my face. I couldn't make out what she looked like without my glasses, but I could see the outline of her features. A round face with a prominent nose and lips and dark eyes like oversized coffee beans. I would have killed for myopia. Instead I got to see the bewildered faces of passerby. An audience for the naked woman and the nerd she tackled.

We were both lying on the grass, I clothed and she not. My poor eyesight served as a natural censor. I heard her taking sharp breaths. She had her hands clamped down against my ankles. She was strong. She did rupture the asphalt from a fall, after all.

When I opened my mouth to speak, her words came out.

"Why did you follow me?" Her voice was rich, as if I was listening to her with more than two ears. Though her voice was calming, my heart raced.

"I –" I started. The feeling hadn't settled in before, but I was now slightly afraid for my life. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Her hands unwrenched my legs. Through the legs of my jeans I could still feel the tingle of her grasp. My hand instinctually reached for my glasses that usually hung from my collar when I wasn't wearing them. I awkwardly patted my torso and cleared my throat. She was looking toward the highway.

"Where did you – that's not what I meant – I mean, how did you – "

Her head whipped around from the highway to face me. I felt like someone paused me with a universal remote. Maybe it was the angle, but she looked a little different just then, her face almost slender. Almost familiar. Blowing air through my dry lips, I tried to gather my thoughts. A few minutes before everything seemed so much clearer. Maybe I was on autopilot. An empty pond is always clear.

“I feel like I know you,” I decided to say, then backtracked. “Obviously that doesn’t make much sense. What I mean is....”

The woman stood. I turned away, even though my eyes already rated the world PG-13.

“I’m Elizabeth. And you’re Martin.”

I chuckled. “My name isn’t Martin.”

“Not yet. Are you hurt?”

I turned back to her. The response left a knot in my stomach. “No, I’m not hurt. But my name is John, by the way. Who’s Martin?”

Elizabeth, looming over me, did not answer. From what I could see, she was beautiful, with hair nearly reaching her wide hips. She was not fazed by my presence nor the fact that car after car zoomed by for a glance at her nudity. We were far enough inside the grassy ditch that no one could see Elizabeth’s face any more than I could, but her raw confidence was almost palpable as she stared down at me. My body was anchored to the grass like a deep-rooted weed.

All of a sudden, Elizabeth stepped over me and walked up uphill toward the pine and oak trees. Her body traveled gently now, more elegantly than when she plummeted into the road. She was a doe, beckoning me into the woods. I jumped to my feet and heard

the muffled crunch of breaking glass beneath my shoe. I didn't register the sound, or the whooshing of cars and trucks, only Elizabeth before me. She was nearing the trees. I followed gingerly, leaving my glasses among the weeds and my car parked beside the pink oleanders.

We walked through an opening in the trees together. The sky was blue, hardly interrupted by clouds. To our left and right and in front of us, bushes and trees inhabited the land. We were strangers here, or I was. Behind us, the highway began to shrink. My black Jetta looked like a matchbox car now. I noticed I didn't bring my phone. Did I even lock the car? Elizabeth did not speak as she waded barefoot through dead leaves and scattered twigs. I thought about offering my clothes to her, then thought better of it. She was dressed in confidence.

"Where are we going?" I finally thought to ask. Enough foliage had obscured the highway completely, and the only sign of the outside world was the sky. An airplane drifted above. I felt the air rumble as it passed.

Elizabeth stopped and considered me. I couldn't tell for sure, but I imagined she furrowed her eyebrows.

"We are going." And that was all she said before continuing forward.

My lips were as dry as concrete now and my heartrate began to increase. What was I doing here? The gray crewneck t-shirt I wore felt heavy with sweat. Suddenly I remembered where I was going in the first place: I was driving back to school after spending the weekend down south at home. My parents had taken my sister and me out to dinner the night before, an interesting Italian place in the city. We sat in a courtyard, an outdoor area with wrought-iron chairs and tables with wooden slats. My sister was happy,

my parents were happy. The food was delicious, or maybe I was just hungry. Pizza and garlic rolls and caprese salad. Enough bread to make anyone feel at home. And once the food was gone, and my dad paid the hefty check, we walked along the main street. We passed by restaurants with smiling hosts and laughing patrons seated outside. We stopped inside art galleries and admired the eccentric sculptures of dogs and paintings of people. We navigated the narrow sidewalks, lined here and there with potted plants and pink and white flowers. Wide-eyed, we stopped inside an ice cream shop, my mom and I demonstrating our love for toppings. Our full bellies kept us there in the city, a comforting gravity.

Now in the forest, with a woman whose face I couldn't see, the butterflies in my stomach protested against gravity. The memories of the weekend felt like a movie I was watching behind prison bars.

"Elizabeth, where the hell are we going?" I demanded. My voice was higher than I wanted it to be.

She halted and turned to me with startling speed. Her face was once again round, more oval than before. The darkness in her eyes seemed less intense, and her nose appeared smaller. She took a bare step forward and pressed her lips into mine. Passion, fear, and uncertainty melded into the spontaneous kiss. I started to weave my hand behind her thick black hair when she pulled back. Like a creature she cocked her head at me. My lips were no longer dry.

"Elizabeth," I uttered, but I could not say more. Yards ahead of us, the trees that I could see clearly from the start of our walk were now blurred. A ringing filled the walls of my empty head. I grabbed my forehead and winced. "What the hell is happening?"

My legs felt weak and I crumpled to the ground. The ringing got louder, eventually blaring within my ears. I couldn't tell if the world around us was silent or if I just couldn't hear it. Almost unconcerned, Elizabeth stood over me, just as she did in the ditch by the highway. She peered into my eyes, and this time, I could see her. It was as if I was nearsighted my whole life. Vile bubbles gurgled in my stomach as her face came into focus. She was gorgeous: perfectly symmetrical eyes, nose and mouth, smooth skin spread tautly over two alert cheekbones, and hydrated lips that put my own to shame. I was in awe with her beauty as my intestines argued with me. Eventually I vomited in the dead leaves to my side. She watched nonchalantly, and then something horrific happened.

As I struggled to keep my eyes open and my stomach under control, Elizabeth kept her face in my line of sight. I breathed heavily and wondered less if and more why I was going to die. Had my life even mattered? She gazed deeply into my eyes, which were no doubt bloodshot and sickly. Then Elizabeth was no longer. Her face became another. What was once a caramel circle beneath her black Rapunzelian hair was now a slender almond shape with hazel eyes and a pointed nose. And then she had an oval face with blue eyes and thin pink lips. And then she had a chiseled face with thick eyebrows and deep dimples and coffee-brown eyes. All beautiful, all terrifying.

My stomach contracted, and I whimpered at Elizabeth's transformations. Her face was morphing more quickly now, each face different from the last. And in that face, I saw my mother, and my sister, and my ex-girlfriend, and my friends, and my father, and my uncle. My temples were sharp with pain and my body ached; I was beginning to seize. Like a flipbook, Elizabeth continued to pass through different faces until it stopped on one face: mine.

I widened my eyes and tried to yelp, but my voice didn't escape. Though the sky was clear, my deteriorating vision transported me somewhere dark. Elizabeth, a woman now bearing my face, stood in front of me. When she spoke, her voice encompassed dozens of others, like churchgoers in mass.

"Those whose purpose has not yet been found, forced to live among those who are bound. We all are one, but our one is not all. Find your purpose, or you too shall fall."

She bent down in front of me and suddenly I was shirtless. With what I could only assume was her original round face, she made eye contact with me. I panted. Unable to move, I watched with dreadful anticipation as she placed a spread-out hand on my chest. A searing pain erupted in my torso and engulfed my side. When the pain became too much, my vision turned to black.

Maybe by the same universal remote, my vision reappeared, but my eyes were already open. I was standing naked in my backyard down south. I looked down. My bare feet rested in the moist soil of an enormous hole. Chunks of earth littered the backyard. The patio, the fence, and the windows were splattered with dirt.

A soreness called my attention to my chest. A red hand-sized rash blanketed my torso. Running my hand along the raised skin, I felt it cover my side and part of my back. *You're Martin.* Before I could do or think anything else, I was transported again.

On the ground in the grassy ditch, I couldn't find my glasses, but I had to find the woman. I paused and glanced back at my car, parked precariously on the side of the highway among the beautiful yet poisonous oleanders. A sweet breeze ruffled my hair and splashed my face. As far as I could see, there was no woman. My shirt felt grainy against my skin from dried sweat. I felt an itch on my chest and back simultaneously.

Back in my Jetta, I reached for my cellphone in one of the cupholders but instead found my glasses. When I put them on, a large crack in the left lens obstructed my vision, making it seem like the road ahead of me suffered a major pothole.