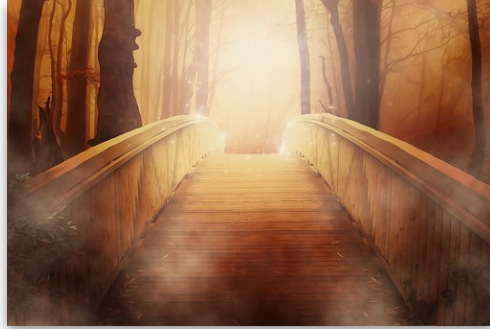


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# TIMELESS TALES

FROM A GATHERING OF SHORT STORIES COMES ONE WHERE ALLEY ENGAGES TORTUROUS PAIN AND A DREAM THAT WILL TAKE HER INTO A WORLD WHERE SHE MUST CHOOSE...

ENJOY THIS SHORT STORY CHOICE FROM TIMELESS TALES - SOON TO BE AVAILABLE WITHIN EVERFLOW'S WRITINGS.



## CHOICE

I WOKE TO A GLARING REMEMBRANCE OF BETRAYAL AND REJECTION. THE WORST KIND, ASIDE FROM MURDER KIDNAPPING A PERSON DURING THE BLEAKEST OF NIGHTS. IN MY MIND'S EYE THE ABUSE WAS UNDENIABLY SEVERE.

IT SEEMED WITH EVERY WORD SPOKEN OR ACTION TAKEN A FRESH LASHING PIERCED MY BEING.

WITH EVERY LASHING FROM THIS SPIKE EMBALMED WHIP, A BRUTAL SHOCK WOULD SWEEP OVER MY BODY CLAIMING JUNKS OF FLESH AS IT BROUGHT ITSELF BACK. BUT THE PULLING AWAY SEEMED TO OFFER ONLY MOMENTS OF RELIEF AS ANOTHER WAVE OF TORMENT AND CRUELTY WOULD ENSUE... AND WITH A CURDLING SCREAM THE WHIP WOULD COME AGAIN. NO MATTER WHAT ANYONE WOULD SAY, THIS WAS HOW I FELT.

I LOST TRACK OF TIME AND THERE WERE MOMENTS WHERE MY SOUL GREW NUMB. DEPRESSION FOUGHT TO SEIZE MY THOUGHTS WHILE A FLOOD OF UNCERTAINTY GNAWED ON MY LAST BREATH. AND, THOUGH A BARRAGE OF CHARACTERS AND SCENARIOS CACKLED MY WAY, A DILIGENT LIGHT REMAINED.

WHILE I FELT AS THOUGH MY SOUL WAS BEING SHREDDED, THIS LIGHT CAUGHT EVERY PIECE. WHILE MY PILLOW WAS PLAGUED BY ENDLESS TEARS BURSTING FROM NIGHTMARE WITHIN NIGHTMARE, THIS LIGHT WHISPERED WORDS OF COMFORT AND VINDICATION. AND AS ANGER VOMITED ON MY VISION PRODUCING A FOUL ODOR, THIS LIGHT MOVED IN CLOSER UNAFRAID OF CONTAMINATION, UNLIKE SO MANY OTHERS WHO PROVIDED ONLY THEIR BACKS FOR ME. THIS LIGHT CLEANED MY WOUNDS AND SPAT IN MY EYES. NOW, I BEGAN TO SEE CLEARLY.

THE NIGHT CAME AND SLEEP BECKONED MY EXHAUSTIVE STATE WITH A LULLABY. THIS LIGHT DREW ME DEEP INTO A DREAM WHERE TWO WORLDS WERE REVEALED. HE SAID I MUST CHOOSE ONE.

ONE WORLD, OR A KINGDOM AS IT APPEARED, WAS QUITE DARK. THERE WAS A SUN IN THE SKY, AND BEYOND THIS BALL OF GAS I COULD SEE A MOON. BOTH WERE DIM AND WEAK IN NATURE, NOTHING GRANDIOSE TO SPEAK OF.

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THIS KINGDOM WAS QUITE LARGE WITH A MASSIVE BOUNDARY FENCE STRETCHING AROUND THE ENTIRE PERIMETER OF LAND. IT WAS TALL AND MADE OF OLD DECAYING WOOD WITH METAL BRACKETS HOLDING NOT SO FIRMLY TOGETHER. AS I STOOD AT THE GATE OF THIS KINGDOM I NOTICED THE BOUNDARY FENCE DIDN'T CEASE IN ITS MOVEMENT AROUND THE OUTER SKIRTS BUT EXTENDED WITHIN THE KINGDOM ITSELF. IT ALMOST EMERGED AS A MAZE, LEADING IN ONE DIRECTION THEN CUTTING THE WANDERER OFF FROM ANOTHER, ONLY TO CAUSE CONFUSION WITH ITS ABRUPT TURNS INTO DEAD ENDS.

AN IRON GATE WITH SPOTS OF RUST FORMING OVER POORLY TOUCHED-UP BLUE PAINT, STOOD 15 FEET TALL AND LOOKED TO BE AS WIDE AS A FOOTBALL FIELD. ONE GATE FOR SUCH A WIDE ENTRANCE THREW ME OFF, AND THEN

I SAW HOW THIS ENTRANCE HAD MANY OPTIONS AS TO WHICH ROAD I COULD TRAVEL UPON. A CREAKING NOISE CAME FROM THE IRON GATE AS IT OPENED AND SLID INTO THE WOOD FENCE. SUDDENLY I HEARD, WIDE IS THE GATE... AND THEN THESE WORDS TRAILED OFF BEFORE I COULD MAKE OUT THE REST OF WHAT WAS BEING ECHOED.

GIVING THIS MOMENT LITTLE ATTENTION I STEPPED THROUGH THE BOUNDARY LINE AND INTO THIS KINGDOM.

INSTANTLY, A WAVE OF SADNESS SWEEPED OVER MY BODY AND I FELT A SUBTLE PING OF PAIN IN MY SOUL. A NECKLACE MATERIALIZED AROUND MY NECK AND IMMEDIATELY I WAS OVERCOME WITH A RAVENOUS DESIRE TO PROTECT IT. IT BECAME A PART OF WHO I WAS, AND AS I LOOKED DOWN I SAW A HEART SHINNING BRIGHT RED WITH GLIMMERS OF LIGHT BOUNCING AROUND WITHIN. MY HEART HAD A BEAUTIFUL SHAPE TO IT, SIMILAR TO A PRISM IN PURPOSE YET STILL HELD THE SHAPE OF A HEART. I KNEW THIS HAD BECOME THE MOST VULNERABLE AND TREASURED PART OF MY BEING, AND I WOULD GUARD IT TILL MY LAST BREATH.

AS I WALKED ON THIS LINGERING SADNESS DEVELOPED AS A FAMILIAR PRESENCE, AND I HAPPILY BECAME DISTRACTED BY THE SCENE THAT WAS BEFORE MY EYES. SO MANY PLACES TO VENTURE INTO, AND SO MANY LANDSCAPES TO WANDER AROUND IN, MANIFESTING MY OWN INDULGENT ADVENTURES. I SAW PEOPLE SCATTERED EVERYWHERE, BUT A STRONG SENSE SAID THIS KINGDOM WAS CATERED FOR ME ALONE. THIS MAY HAVE BEEN A SELFISH PERCEPTION, BUT OH WELL I THOUGHT.

I SAW ART GALLERIES, SHOPS AND A QUAIN CAFÉ DRESSED TO LOOK LIKE PARIS WITH ITS COBBLESTONE ENTRANCE COMPLETING THE ATTIRE. THE COURTYARD WAS WELCOMING AS MEN AND WOMEN OF MANY ETHNICITIES AND SPEECH SAT UPON STEPS AND LEANED AGAINST CLASSIC CHATEAUS BURNING NATURAL FIRE, THIS CREATING A UNIQUE AMBIANCE. WHILE PEOPLE WERE PROFOUNDLY AND PRIDEFULLY DIFFERENT, ONE ASPECT OF EACH MAN AND WOMAN REMAINED EERILY THE SAME.

EACH PERSON CARRIED A HEART AROUND THEIR NECK. ALIKE IN MANY ASPECTS, EACH HEART DIFFERENTIATED IN THE SLIGHTEST. WHILE SOME ALLOWED IT TO HANG FREELY I STILL CAUGHT THE GUARDED NATURE IN THEIR EYES; THEY WERE ALWAYS MINDFUL OF IT. OTHERS CLASPED TIGHTLY TO THEIR HEART TRUSTING NO ONE IN CLOSE PROXIMITY TO THEM. SOME FOLKS COWERED IN DARK CORNERS OF THE STREETS CLEAVING TO WHAT REMAINED OF THEIR ONCE BRIGHT RED HEART. THEY SEEMED TO HAVE BECOME CLOUDY AND MURKY IN DEPTH AND PRESENCE, NO LONGER COULD I MAKE-OUT THE GLIMMERS OF LIGHT THAT ONCE DANCED WITHIN.

AS I PASSED THE CAFÉ AND A LARGE VINTAGE BOOK STORE, I SAW A WOMAN HUDDLED AGAINST ONE OF THE BOUNDARY WALLS. BEHIND HER IN GRAFFITI READ, YOU CAN'T GO THIS WAY. I CONTINUED TO WALK ALONG THE WALL NOTICING PORTIONS OF IT CRUMBLING AND MORE GRAFFITI... NOT ALLOWED, YOU'LL MESS IT UP. I

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CONTINUED ON, ENTRANCED BY THESE WORDS WHICH SEEMED TO TAKE ON LIFE, JUMPING OFF THE WALL AND DELVING DEEP INTO MY HEART. I FELT MY HEART GROW A LITTLE IRRITATED AS I READ IN BRIGHT RED LETTERS,

MINE!! AND THEN SOMETHING STRUCK ME AS I TURNED A CORNER.

THERE STOOD A WALL FORGED DECADES AGO, DETERIORATING OVER TIME. I DREW IN CLOSE, AND THROUGH THE CHUNKS OF MISSING WALL I COULD SEE A SMALL MAN WITH A DARK HEART AROUND HIS NECK, HANDS MANGLED AND BLOODIED FROM FIXING AND REWORKING THIS BOUNDARY WALL SURROUNDING HIS HOUSE. PAST HIM I COULD SEE THIS MAGNIFICENT STRUCTURE. IT APPEARED TO BE FROM THE BAROQUE PERIOD DURING THE EARLY 1700'S.

THE OPULENCE WAS ASTONISHING AND I LONGED TO GO IN AND GAZE UPON THIS MASTERPIECE. HIS HOME WAS SIMILAR TO SOME OF THE PALACES THAT FOLLOWED THIS ARCHITECTURE FROM ITALY INTO GERMANY.

ABSOLUTELY GLORIOUS WITH ITS PLUSH FOUNTAINS JETTING FORTH WATER, CONTINUALLY SHIFTING IN SHAPE. ITS CURVES AND SCULPTURES CAUSED ME TO PAUSE AND RECONSIDER COMPLETING MY ART DEGREE. I CHUCKLED BENEATH MY BREATH. THE INTRICATE BLENDS MASTERED HERE SEEMED TO ABSORB ALL LIGHT AVAILABLE IN THE ATMOSPHERE. I LOOKED ABOUT BUT COULD SEE NO GATE NOR AN ENTRANCE LEADING TO HIS HOME. ONLY WALL.

THE HOME STOOD 4 TO 5 STORIES HIGH WITH THE FEELING THAT IT WAS SOARING INTO INFINITY, TEASING THE PASSING WANDERER ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL. WHY WAS THERE NO PATH TO HIS HOME? I TRIED TO SPEAK TO HIM THROUGH THE WALL BUT HE CONTINUED HIS TASK UNINTERRUPTED. WITH EVERY STONE, BRICK OR PIECE OF WOOD -WHICH HE USED TO FIX HIS WALL- I NOTICED THE GRAFFITI ON HIS BOUNDARY WALL BECOMING MORE PRONOUNCED. THE COLORS MORE VIBRANT AND THE WORDS MORE PUNGENT TO THE READING HEART. HIS WALL SAID YOU'LL NEVER HURT ME AGAIN, AND I'LL GET YOU BEFORE YOU GET ME.

AS I WALKED AWAY FROM THIS SAD COLD MAN I SAW SMALL WRITING ON THE EDGE OF HIS BOUNDARY WALL NEAR THE BOTTOM. IN A MIX OF GREEN AND BLUE GRAFFITI I READ, YOU KILLED ME. YOU TOOK AWAY MY NAME. AND, WHO AM I?

Wow. I THOUGHT TO MYSELF AS I MOVED TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STREET, WORKING MY WAY TO AN OPEN FIELD AROUND THE BEND. THOUGH THE BOUNDARY WALLS DIFFERED IN STABILITY, HEIGHT AND MATERIALS, THE REST OF THE KINGDOM WAS QUITE BEAUTIFUL AND WELCOMING. MOST PEOPLE I'D SEEN HAVE SHOWN THEMSELVES TO BE FRIENDLY, TRULY ENJOYING LIFE HERE. HOPING I'D MEET SOME NEW FRIENDS I CONTINUED ON. A CAL JOGGED PAST ME AND SMILED AS I SCOOTED TO THE LEFT.

THERE WAS A GIANT WEEPING WILLOW IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS FIELD AND I SAW A COUPLE SITTING UNDER HER LIMBS. AS I APPROACHED, THE CAL LOOKED AT ME SUSPICIOUSLY AND HELD HER LOVERS HAND A LITTLE TIGHTER.

I NOTICED HER SUSPICION SO I INTRODUCED MYSELF TO HER, FIRST.

Hi, my name is ALLEY.

WITH A BIG SMILE I HELD OUT MY HAND. HER SUSPICION TURNED QUICKLY AROUND AND A FACE THAT SEEMED ALL TOO FAMILIAR, ROSE TO THE SURFACE. BIG BLUE EYES, A BRIGHT SMILE WITH BRACES PROUDLY SHOWING AND A SOFT HAND SHAKE.

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HELLO! MY NAME IS JANE AND THIS IS MY BOYFRIEND WILLIAM. WE WERE JUST ENJOYING THIS BEAUTIFUL WEATHER BEFORE GOING TO OUR GROUP.

I FOUND THAT FUNNY, FOR THE SUN SEEMED TO BARELY SHINE HERE. BUT THE THOUGHT WAS FLEETING FOR I WAS BECOMING USED TO THE ATMOSPHERE, FORGETTING WHAT BRIGHT SUNLIGHT FELT LIKE.

THAT SOUNDS GREAT. IT'S NICE TO MEET YOU BOTH. MAY I JOIN YOU? I'M NEW TO THESE PARTS AND I'D LIKE TO ACQUAINT MYSELF WITH SOME PEOPLE, YA KNOW?

WELL, SURE, PLEASE DO!

SHE SEEMED A BIT TOO EXCITED, AS THOUGH SHE APPROVED OF ME AND I WAS NO LONGER A THREAT. I FOLLOWED THEM ACROSS THE FIELD AND DOWN A STONE PATH TO ANOTHER SECTION OF TOWN. THEY WALKED ME PAST ANOTHER BOUNDARY WALL WHICH CIRCLED AROUND AND THROUGH A GROCERY STORE, CONDOMINIUMS, EVEN A PLAYGROUND, MAKING IT NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE FOR KIDS TO PLAY FREELY WITH ONE ANOTHER. I SAW SOME PARENTS HERD THEIR CHILDREN INTO GROUPS OF BOYS AND GIRLS, NOT ALLOWING THEM TO CONVERSE TOGETHER.

THIS WALL WASN'T AS TALL AS THE OTHERS, BUT IT SPLIT THE PARK NEARLY IN HALF. THERE WERE CHILDREN GRABBING CLAY AND ROCKS, ATTEMPTING TO FILL IN THE LARGE HOLES AND INCREASE THE WALL IN HEIGHT, BUT THEY COULD ONLY REDO SO MUCH. I STARED IN AMAZEMENT AS WE PASSED ONE SECTION OF THE WALL.

RIGHT BEFORE MY EYES, IN FRONT OF TWO LITTLE BOYS, GRAFFITI MATERIALIZED. IT READ, GIRLS ARE STUPID AND

YOU CAN NEVER TRUST A GIRL. I QUICKLY GLANCED OVER AT THE GIRLS AS THEY WOULD SWING, SEE A BOY AND THEN RUN TO THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WALL, HASTILY LAYING THEIR OWN MATERIAL ATOP. MATERIALIZING IN FRONT OF THEM WAS YELLOW GRAFFITI PROCLAIMING, DON'T LISTEN TO BOYS!

WE CONTINUED WALKING AND THIS COUPLE SEEMED OBLIVIOUS TO THE SCENE. I THEN SAW A SMALL SWEET LOOKING GIRL WITH RED HAIR PULLED BACK IN BRAIDS. SHE STOOD IN FRONT OF THE WALL WITH HER HEAD DOWN HOLDING ONTO HER HEART AS SHE WEPT. MY HEART SHIFTED FROM AN APATHETIC NUMBNESS TO A PLACE WHERE I WELCOMED A PRICK OF COMPASSION. THIS COMPASSION GREW AS I WITNESSED THE GRAFFITI FORM. I NOW RECOGNIZED HOW ONE'S HEART WAS TIED TO THESE BOUNDARY WALLS, CHILD OR ADULT, ALL WERE CONNECTED.

HER WALL WAS DIFFERENT THAN THE REST I HAD SEEN. I FIRST SAW IN BLUE WORDS, FADING IN AND OUT, AFRAID. DOUBT. SHAME. VICTIM. PAIN. LOST. THESE FADED AND WERE REPLACED WITH RED GRAFFITI, ALWAYS ALONE.

MISUNDERSTOOD. NOT GOOD ENOUGH. AND FINALLY BLACK GRAFFITI MATCHED THE BLACK SPOTS IN HER HEART THAT NOW LOOSELY HUNG AROUND HER NECK, PERFECTIONISM. RELIGION. TIT-FOR-TAT. ANALYTICAL REASONING. CAUTION. DON'T FEEL. MY HEART BEGAN TO SOFTEN AND I FELT TEARS FALL DOWN MY FACE. THEY WERE WARM AND IT WERE AS THOUGH I HAD NEVER CRIED BEFORE. I SAW LOVE DRAIN FROM HER FACE, AND A COUNTERFEIT LOVE TAKE ITS PLACE. HER BOUNDARY WALL PRESENTED ITSELF AS A LOVE THAT MADE SENSE TO THIS WORLD, BUT I KNEW THAT THIS LOVE'S ONLY PURPOSE WAS TO PROTECT THE HURT WITHIN. THE LITTLE GIRL WIPED HER EYES AND RAN OFF, HOLDING ONTO HER HEART WITH HER SMALL HAND. I BECAME AWARE OF HOW SHE NOW EXPECTED HER LOVE TO BE WON.

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FOLLOWING JANE AND WILLIAM I FELT A LITTLE DISORIENTED, UNSURE OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING TO ME. THIS WORLD APPEARED NORMAL AND RATIONAL AT MERE OBSERVANCE, BUT I WAS UNSETTLED AND THIS ONLY GREW AS I JOINED THEM IN THEIR GROUP.

I SAT, PEERING AROUND THE COFFEE HOUSE. THERE WERE MEN AND WOMEN OF ALL AGES, MAYBE 15 OF US. WE RESTED ON COUCHES OR AT SMALL TABLES OR ON BAR STOOLS. THE PLACE WAS VERY COZY REMINDING ME OF A COFFEE HOUSE IN MANHATTAN. WHILE THIS WAS A MIXED GENDER GROUP, THERE WERE STILL RULES DESIGNED TO BE ADHERED TO FOR THE PROTECTION OF HEARTS. PARTICIPATION WASN'T MANDATORY BUT I NOTICED WAS EXPECTED AT SOME POINT. JANE AND WILLIAM KNEW A COUPLE OTHER FOLKS AND INTRODUCED ME.

HEY, I'M ALLEY.

NICE TO MEET YOU, I'M SCOTT AND THIS IS PAM.

WE RESPECTFULLY SHOOK HANDS AS THE MEET AND GREET CONTINUED FOR ABOUT 15 MORE MINUTES. SMALL TALK ABOUT SPORTS, TV PROGRAMS, AND FOOD JOINTS UNFOLDED, WHILE OTHERS TALKED ABOUT THEIR KIDS AND SCHOOL. MOST OF THE MEN AND WOMEN WERE UPBEAT AND POSITIVE BUT SOME SPENT MORE OF THEIR ENERGY COMPLAINING ABOUT POLITICS AND THE ECONOMY. THERE ALWAYS SEEMED TO BE SOMEONE TO BLAME FOR SOMETHING. I PAUSED IN THOUGHT AS I NOTICED A MAN LOOKING AT ME WITH A KIND SMILE DRAPED UPON HIS FACE. HE DIDN'T SPEAK TO ANYONE, BUT SAT QUIETLY. NO ONE SEEMED TO PAY HIM ANY ATTENTION. I DIDN'T SEE HIS HEART AROUND HIS NECK BUT WAS SET OFF KILTER BY HIS EYES. THEY BURNED WITH FIERCE WARMTH I HAD YET TO SEE IN ANYONE ELSE. WHILE THERE WAS JUDGMENT, CONTEMPT AND BITTERNESS ALL AROUND, I ONLY FELT KINDNESS AND AUTHENTICITY IN HIM. STRANGE, WHY HAS NO ONE NOTICED HIM? I WONDERED.

AS THE LEADER OF THE GROUP CALLED EVERYONE IN, HE LOOKED AWAY. I WASN'T EXACTLY SURE WHAT TO EXPECT, SO I SAT AND LISTENED FOR THE FIRST 45 MINUTES BEFORE SHARING. MY MIND REELED AS FOLKS SHARED, AND MY HEART BURNED WITHIN. AS THEY SHARED, ONE AFTER ANOTHER, I SAW WRITING UPON THEIR FOREHEADS. PUNISHMENT. FEAR.

AS JANE SPOKE SHE CLUNG TO WILLIAM AND THE WORDS INSECURE AND CONDITIONAL MATERIALIZED UPON HER FOREHEAD. HER HEART CHANGED IN COLOR AND HER ONCE GLEE FILLED COUNTENANCE FADED AND GAVE RISE TO HURT. I WATCHED AND LISTENED AS EACH PERSON, FULL OF BELIEF AND ASSURANCE, WERE BEING CONTROLLED BY THEIR OWN HURT. EVERY HEART LOST COLOR A BIT MORE, WHILE EVERY ONE OF THEM HELD ONTO THEIR HEART A LITTLE TIGHTER. WHEN THE OPPORTUNITY CAME FOR ME TO SHARE, I WAS UNSURE OF WHAT TO SAY. SO, I OPENED MY MOUTH HOPING SOMETHING I SAID WOULD MAKE SENSE. BUT AS I TALKED I SAW IN THEIR EYES THAT EVERYTHING I SHARED WAS NOT MAKING ANY SENSE TO THEM OR THEIR BELIEF SYSTEMS. IT WERE AS THOUGH I WAS SPEAKING ANOTHER LANGUAGE.

ALL THE WHILE, THIS KIND LOOKING MAN SIMPLY WATCHED IN CONTENTMENT. AFTER I FINISHED SPEAKING HE STOOD, AND THE OTHERS SAW HIM FOR THE FIRST TIME. WE SAT THERE STUNNED AND WAITING, FOR HE HELD AN AUTHORITY THAT BECKONED NOTHING LESS THAN QUIET RESPECT AND HONOR.

ALLEY, COME WITH ME.

HE HELD OUT HIS HAND TO MINE AND LOOKED SOFTLY WITHIN MY EYES. HIS CARE FOR ME BURROWED SO DEEP WITHIN MY SOUL, IT FELT AS HOME. I STOOD AND TOOK HIS HAND AS HE LED ME OUT THE DOORS AND INTO THE COURTYARD. HIS EYES WERE A GOLDEN BROWN AND HE WORE WAVY CHESTNUT COLORED HAIR TO HIS SHOULDERS. HE WAS STRONG AND LEAN AND STOOD ABOVE ME ABOUT 6-8 INCHES. WALKING ALONG SIDE ME HE

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SMILED BROADLY, EXPOSING A MOUTH FULL OF WHITE TEETH CARRYING THEIR OWN STRENGTH. I FOUND TREMENDOUS COMFORT IN HIS PRESENCE AND LEANED INTO HIM.

HE STOPPED AND TURNED TO FACE ME. HOLDING MY HANDS AS A BROTHER WOULD HE SAID,

I AM JESUS.

HIS NAME REVERBERATED IN MY HEART AND I COULD FEEL MY ENTIRE BEING CRUMBLE INTO HIM, HE THEN KISSED MY CHEEK. FOR THE FIRST TIME, I FELT STRENGTH IN LOVE FROM THE PUREST MAN I'VE EVER KNOWN. AND THIS IS ALL THE LOVE I'LL EVER NEED... EVER KNOW.

SUDDENLY, WE STOOD BACK AT THE IRON GATE, THE ENTRANCE TO THIS DARK KINGDOM. I DIDN'T WANT TO LEAVE HIM, I DIDN'T WANT TO WALK AWAY. I KNEW HIS PRESENCE FROM BEFORE. HE HAS SPOKEN TO ME BEFORE, I JUST DIDN'T SEE HIS FACE. BUT NOW I DO, AND I DON'T WANT HIM TO LEAVE ME. I WAS SO AFRAID. HE WAS SHOWING ME THIS IS THE REASON MY HEART ESCAPES TO ANOTHER.

I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU, ALLEY. I NEVER HAVE, BUT NOW YOU SEE ME FACE TO FACE AND KNOW. I HAVE MUCH TO TELL YOU, MUCH TO SHOW YOU. WE WILL WALK INTO THE KINGDOM TOGETHER AND YOU WILL SEE.

IN THIS MOMENT MYSTERY BECAME A DEAR FRIEND. I'VE COME TO SEE I KNOW NOTHING, NOTHING AT ALL.

AS JESUS AND I STOOD FACING THE GATE, I FELT ANXIETY RISE IN MY CHEST. PULSATING COLORS BEGAN TO BE LIFTED FROM EVERY OBJECT. THE GATE, THE TREES, THE SUN AND THE MOUNTAINS, LIKE A GREAT AND MIGHTY ARTIST WAS SUCKING HIS PAINT BACK INTO HIS TUBE. AND AS I CONTINUED TO WATCH CREATION DISPERSE AND REGATHER INTO ONE STARTING POINT, I WAS REMINDED OF THOSE VIDEO'S THAT WOULD ATTEMPT TO SHOW WHAT LIGHT BEING ABSORBED BY A BLACKHOLE WOULD LOOK LIKE. WHILE HOLDING HIS HAND I LOOKED WITH FEAR IN THE EYES OF THE ONE WHO HAD NONE... AND FOR A MOMENT, PEACE CONSUMED ME AND TIME CEASED. THEN I FELT MY BODY FADE AWAY. I HELD MY BREATH. HE STOOD SMILING INTO MY EYES WITH EVERY PASSING MOMENT.

THEN I WOKE.

MY EYES FLUNG WIDE OPEN AS I SAT STRAIGHT UP IN BED. LOOKING OVER AT MY PHONE THE TIME READ 1:11 AM. I TOOK IN A DEEP BREATH AND KICKED MY LONG TIRED LEGS OVER THE SIDE.

STRETCHING BRIEFLY, I STOOD AND WALKED TO MY WINDOW. I CHERISHED HOW MY HOME RESTED ALONG THE CUSP OF FARM LAND WHERE MY PEEK-A-BOO VIEW TEASED MY LONGINGS FOR COUNTRY LIFE. SOMEDAY, THOUGHT I.

PULLING BACK THE CURTAINS I PEERED AT THE FRESH VIEW OF TALL STREET LAMPS AND SLEEPING HOMES SCATTERED ABOUT. I IMAGINED FAMILIES SLEEPING PEACEABLY IN THEIR BEDS, DREAMING THE DREAMS THAT WILL PREPARE THEM FOR THEIR NEXT DAY.

AS I LOOKED TO MY NEIGHBOR'S HOME ACROSS THE STREET I THOUGHT ABOUT THEIR FAMILY AND THEN A MEMORY BURST FORTH IN MY CONSCIOUSNESS. IT FELT INTRUSIVE, BUT MEMORIES DON'T SEEM TO CARRY WITH THEM REQUEST'S ASKING, PERMISSION TO ENTER? SO, WITHOUT CONDITION, I WAS LEFT FLOATING IN THE MIDST OF IT.

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IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL DAY OUT AND ROGER HAD JUST PUT ON HIS MASSIVE FISHING BOOTS SO HE COULD MOW THE LAWN. HE ALWAYS SUITED UP AS THOUGH HE WERE ABOUT TO ENTER THE WOODS FOR A WEEK LONG EXCURSION. I OFTEN THOUGHT IT TO BE CUTE AND RECALL SMILING WIDE AS I WATCHED HIM PUT A RAG OVER HIS FACE AND WRESTLE WITH THE MOWER TO GET IT GOING. THIS MEMORY CONTINUED ON AND IT WAS QUITE DIFFICULT TO SUPPRESS IT THIS TIME. ALL I COULD DO WAS SQUEEZE MY EYES SHUT AND ALLOW THE TEARS TO FALL.

LEAVING MY CURTAINS OPEN, I WALKED BACK TO MY BED, CRAWLED UNDER MY COVERS AND CRIED SOFTLY UNTIL I DRIFTED BACK ASLEEP.

MY SKIN FELT DIFFERENT, KISSED BY A SWEET COMFORT. MY BODY EXPERIENCED TENDER RELAXATIONS AS I BREATHED IN A SOOTHING AROMA OF VANILLA AND LILAC. MY HEART AND CONSCIOUSNESS BEGAN TO STIR. I FELT A SOFT SMILE FORM UPON MY FACE AS MY EYES OPENED, INTUITIVELY ACCLIMATED TO THIS LIGHT I HAD AWAKENED IN.

I LAID IN A VAST GOLDEN WHEAT FIELD SPACED PERFECTLY AROUND ME. UNDERNEATH WAS A BLANKET OF PEARLESCENT SAND, SMOOTH LIKE SILK AND AS COOL AS A COMFORTING BREEZE ON A SCORCHED DAY. I PAUSED IN AN ELAPSED BREATH, WISHING THIS MOMENT WOULD LAST FOREVER. IT WAS LIKE I HAD COME BACK HOME. A HOME I KNEW SO WELL FROM A DISTANT MEMORY, AND ODDLY ENOUGH, RIGHT HERE ALL ALONG.

BREATHING IN DEEPLY, I RAISED UP AND PEERED AROUND. THIS FIELD SEEMED TO HAVE NO END. THE SKY WAS CRESCENT BLUE WITH A DEEPLY ENRICHING ORANGE SUN, AND YET LIGHT FILLING THE ATMOSPHERE APPEARED TO BE THE SOURCE OF SIGHT... OF LIGHT! I STOOD AND ENJOYED THE FEELING OF MY BARE FEET ADJUSTING TO A GROUND THAT HAD NEVER BEEN WALKED UPON. A SUBSTANCE MY EYES HAVE NEVER SEEN NOR FELT.

TURNING AROUND I SAW A GIANT WHITE WILLOW TREE ATOP A LUSH HILL. THIS TREE SANG THE SONG OF LIFE AND UNITY. SHE WAS WISE, STRONG AND EXEMPLIFIED STABILITY. AS HER BRANCHES SWAYED I FELT THE CHILD LIKE JOY AND INNOCENCE EXUDING FROM WITHIN. SHE WAS AN EXPRESSION OF LADY WISDOM AND BENEATH HER BEAUTY SAT A MAN.

I WAS DRAWN TO HIM AND BEGAN TO WALK TO WHERE HE SAT. AS I MOVED IN CLOSER I SAW THE OUTLINE OF HIS FACE AND HIS FEATURES BECAME CLEARER. HIS SKIN WAS AN OLIVE SHADE. HIS CHIN, STRONG, YET HE WORE A CLOSELY SHAVED BEARD UPON HIS FACE AND THIS SOMEHOW SOFTENED HIM. HIS WAVY HAIR SAT ABOVE HIS EARS AND THE GOLDEN BROWN COLOR SIMPLY BURST WITH BRILLIANCE.

THE CLOSER I WALKED, HIS EYES CAME INTO FOCUS AND I COULD FEEL THE SMILE ON MY FACE GROW WIDER AND WIDER. I KNEW THOSE EYES. LARGE, DOE SHAPED AND DEEP BROWN. THERE WERE STILL GOLDEN SPECKS ERUPTING FROM WITHIN AND I UTTERED BENEATH MY BREATH, JESUS. HE PEERED INTO MY EYES WITH A JOY FILLED INTENSITY THAT BRUSHED AWAY ALL REMNANTS OF FEAR. HE SMILED BROADLY, THEN LOOKED DOWN AS HIS HANDS CONTINUED THE WOOD WORK HE HAD STARTED BEFORE I SAW HIM. I CHERISHED HOW MUCH HE ENJOYED LIFE. I BECAME LOST IN HIS WONDERMENT OF ALL THINGS, AND DRAWN INTO THE BEAUTY THAT I NATURALLY NEGLECTED WITHOUT HIM BY MY SIDE. HIS PASSIONS EXCITED ME, HIS FIERCE LOVE ENTHRALLED ME, AND WHEN HIS HEART SOFTENED FOR THE HARD HEARTED, I WAS READY FOR MY HEART TO SOFTEN WITH HIM. THE BRANCHES OF LADY WISDOM PARTED AS I APPROACHED, INVITING ME TO SEAMLESSLY MAKE MY WAY BENEATH HER AND NEXT TO HIM. I SAT ON THE SOFT GREEN GRASS, PRESSING MY BACK AGAINST HER TRUNK. HE CHUCKLED, AND THIS WOKE A CHUCKLE WITHIN MYSELF.

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WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

I ASKED AS MY FACE BEAMED WITH DELIGHT.

OH, I'M JUST HAPPY.

EVEN HIS EYES SMILED.

HE WAS CARVING A PIECE OF WOOD WITH A SHARD OF GLASS. I LOOKED ONCE AND THEN AGAIN. MY EYES OPENED WIDE AS I WITNESSED WHAT APPEARED TO BE RAINBOWS DANCING IN THIS REFLECTIVE GLASS.

STUART MANSFIELD.

HE SAID WITH A SMILE. I WAITED FOR MORE... JESUS WAS SO PROUD AND A NEW TYPE OF JOY FILLED THE AIR WE BREATHED.

STUART MANSFIELD IS A MAN WHO LIVES IN JAPAN RIGHT NOW. HE IS AN ARTIST WHO IS FILLED WITH LIFE.

I SAW EXCITEMENT FILL HIS COUNTENANCE.

SO, HE MADE THAT GLASS? OR A PIECE OF ART THAT THIS GLASS CAME FROM?

I ASKED RATHER CURIOUSLY.

JESUS CONTINUED TO SHAPE HIS WOOD AS HE SPOKE.

STUART IS A MUSICIAN AND HAS CREATED BEAUTIFUL ART WITH HIS FAITH, INTUITION AND VOICE. HE HAS BROUGHT HEALING TO MANY AND SHOWED THE WORLD THAT I AM HERE.

HE PAUSED ANOTHER MOMENT AND CONTINUED.

THE BEAUTY THAT STUART'S MUSIC CREATES HAS FORMED MANY SHARDS OF GLASS, JUST LIKE THIS ONE. AND NOW, I HAVE THE PLEASURE OF CREATING ANOTHER PIECE OF BEAUTY BECAUSE OF THE BEAUTY WHICH FORMED THIS.

JESUS LIFTED UP THE RAINBOW INFUSED GLASS FOR ME TO SEE AGAIN. I WAS TRANSFIXED, UNABLE TO LOOK AWAY.

I SAT THERE SILENTLY ENGULFED IN WHAT WAS TRANSPIRING BEFORE MY EYES, AND THEN JESUS FINISHED.

HE SET HIS CARVING NEXT TO THE WILLOW TREE, THEN HANDED ME THE GLASS. I WAS STUNNED THAT HE WOULD GIVE ME SUCH A TREASURE, BUT JESUS WAS OVERJOYED TO DO SO. WE SMILED AND WALKED OVER THE HILL AS I PUT THE GLASS IN MY POCKET.

AS WE WALKED OVER AND DOWN THE OTHER SIDE, WE LAUGHED AND TOLD STORIES. JESUS TOLD ME A STORY ABOUT WHEN HE WAS LIVING WITH PETER AND HIS FAMILY. ABOUT HOW MUCH OF A SPIT-FIRE HIS MOTHER-IN-LAW WAS.



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CHILDREN, WHO ALSO LIVED IN THE SAME COURTYARD, WOULD RUN THROUGH IT, WEAVING IN AND OUT OF THE PERSONAL DWELLINGS; CHASING ONE ANOTHER AS THEY LAUGHED HYSTERICALLY.

HE SMILED WIDELY AS A CHILD WOULD, AND CONTINUED.

ONE LITTLE BOY WAS BEING CHASED BY A LITTLE GIRL AND PETER'S MOTHER-IN-LAW CAUGHT HER AND SET HER STRAIGHT. LETTING HER KNOW THAT 'LITTLE GIRLS DIDN'T BEHAVE THIS WAY.'

JESUS QUOTED WITH A TURNED UP CHIN AND BRIGHT EYES.

THE LITTLE GIRL RAN AWAY AS I SAT WITH A SMILE WATCHING THIS WOMAN TURN AND CHUCKLE TO HERSELF.

HE LAUGHED BOISTEROUSLY RECALLING THE WOMAN'S MISCHIEVOUS SPARK. JESUS LOVED PLAYING GAMES WITH THE CHILDREN AND SHARING WITH THEM STORIES ABOUT OUR FATHER.

I REMEMBERED THE FIRST BIRD EVER FORMED AND AS I DESCRIBED TO THEM HOW I FELT, IT WAS AS THOUGH I WAS THERE AGAIN.

HE SAID THE CHILDREN COULDN'T HELP BUT BE DRAWN INTO THIS MOMENT WITH HIM.

THEY ARE MY FRIENDS.

JESUS SAID WITH A TONE RESONATING PURE INNOCENCE.

EVERY MOMENT I AM WITH HIM, I FEEL AS THOUGH IT IS THE FIRST. I CAN'T FIGURE THIS OUT AND LOSE MYSELF IN THE WONDERMENT OF IT. IT'S NOT UNTIL I HEARD A LOW RUMBLING SOUND IN THE DISTANCE THAT I LOOKED UP AND SAW AN IMMEASURABLY MAGNIFICENT BODY OF WATER BEFORE US, WITH A SINGLE BENCH PLACED ON THIS WHITE SHORE SEEMING TO HAVE NO BEGINNING AND NO END. HOW DOES HE DO IT? I GLEEFULLY PONDERED WITHIN MYSELF.

I LOVE THE OCEAN AND WHITE SANDY BEACHES, AND THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A DEEP COMFORT IN A BENCH OVERLOOKING TREMENDOUS BRILLIANCE. HE KNOWS ME.

WE WALKED ON THE SHORE AND ARRIVED AT A SIMPLE WOOD BENCH. THE ENTIRE BENCH LOOKED AS THOUGH IT WERE MADE FROM REPURPOSED WOOD WITH TRACES OF TIME ETCHED INTO EVERY CREVICE. IT HELD A PEWTER TONE WITHIN ITS COLOR AND WHAT LOOKED LIKE RED BLOOD AS A WASHED-IN STAIN.

THERE WAS A COVER, A SEALANT OF SORTS, THAT DIDN'T ERASE THE AGE AND MYSTERY OF THE BENCH'S WOODWORK, BUT PROTECTED WHAT WAS BELOW ITS SURFACE. JESUS SPOKE WITH A CALM AND SOBERED SOUND, INVITING ME TO SIT. THE BENCH WAS SMOOTH TO THE TOUCH AND SECURE IN ITS STRENGTH. I FELT AS THOUGH I WERE SITTING UPON THE THRONE. INCREDIBLE...

ALLEY, IT IS TIME.

JESUS PAUSED AS HE STARED INTO THE VASTNESS OF THESE ETERNAL TIDES.

YES, I CAN FEEL IT...

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I TOO WAS UNABLE TO PULL MY EYES AWAY FROM THE SCENE BEFORE US. WITHOUT SAYING A WORD JESUS SPOKE KNOWING THE NERVOUSNESS OF MY SOUL.

DO NOT WORRY.

HIS COUNTENANCE WAS STILL AND HE SMILED WITH PROFOUND ASSURANCE.

I WAS WITH YOU IN EVERY MOMENT. I WAS WITH HIM IN EVERY MOMENT.

MY HEART SUDDENLY MELTED AS MY PERSPECTIVE SHIFTED IN WAVES OF COLOR AND POINTEDNESS. SUDDENLY, THE WAVES BEFORE ME BECAME A DISTANT SCENE AS A WHITE LIGHT, STARTING AS A SMALL FLICKER, INCREASED IN SIZE, ILLUMINATING ALL I COULD SEE.

I WAS BEING DRAWN DEEP INTO HER LIGHT AS MEMORY AFTER MEMORY PLAYED BEFORE THE THEATER OF MY MIND'S EYE. WHAT ONCE WAS A GOOD OR BAD MEMORY BECAME SIMPLY A MEMORY. WHERE DIVISION ONCE SAID THERE IS ROGER AND THERE AM I, MY TUNNEL VISION WIDENED AND IT BECAME US. NO MATTER WHAT US LOOKED LIKE.

AND THEN, WITH PERTINENT DISTINCTION, JESUS MATERIALIZED IN EVERY MOMENT. I HEARD A GENTLE VOICE THAT SOUNDED AS A THOUSAND OCEANS, SAY, I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HERE. MY HEART SHOOK WITH SUCH VERACITY IT CAUSED THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE TO ECHO ITS SOUND.

I SAW VIBRANT SOUND WAVES TURN THE WORLD UPSIDE DOWN, WITH LIGHT PARTICLES TAKING ON A DANCE MY CLEAR EYE COULD SEE.

I FELT STARS OF REVELATION BURSTING ALL AROUND, WITH TIME HANGING ON A STRING IN THE DISTANCE. MY ENTIRE BEING COULD BARELY CONTAIN THE IMMENSE JOY THAT WAS BEGINNING TO UNRAVEL EVERY ELEMENT FASHIONING ME, YET I WAS BEING HELD TOGETHER!

AS QUICK AND AS FIERCE AS I WAS DRAWN IN, IT HAPPENED SO THAT I WAS BROUGHT OUT... REMAINING IN, ALWAYS.

IN, WHAT SEEMED TO BE THE BLINK OF AN EYE, I RESTED ONCE AGAIN ON THAT SIMPLE WOOD BENCH, GAZING INTO THE SAME WAVES NEXT TO JESUS WHO HIMSELF CONTINUED TO SMILE WITH SWEET SINCERITY.

IN ANY SITUATION YOU HOLD THE KEY. PEOPLE ARE WANTING TO BE FREE, AS YOU DID. LEARN TO READ. YOU ARE THEIR EYES INTO REALITY.