

Run Off

Benjamin didn't feel the spray of gravel against his shins or how tightly his fists were clenched in his pockets. All he saw were the ends of her hair blowing through the car window taking the colors of the sunset with them. He watched the receding end of the car and remarked on how much rust was on the back bumper. He'd never noticed that before and wondered what else he'd missed in the ten short years of his life. It had taken him some time to get used to it but Benjamin had dealt with his mother's absences before. He would sit on the porch in his sleeping bag waiting with his uncle for a pair of headlights to creep back toward the house. Benjamin would always fall asleep and wake the next morning running to the window to look for the car. There it was and a huge wave of relief would wash over him. The pain and panic of the night before ebbing away as if it had never been there in the first place.

"This was it" he thought, as the dog barked incessantly behind him, each sharp yelp punctuating the pain of his mother's leaving.

"Benjamin!" his uncle called from behind the screen door. "Come in and get some supper."

He wasn't going to touch that meal with a ten foot pole. His mother said it was the overcooked pot roast that made up her mind this time.

"It's poison" she'd told his uncle. "Poison bleeding out and bubbling up all over everybody."

And then she was gone.

"This time for good" she'd said.

Benjamin knew she meant it this time.

"Benjamin!" his uncle called again. "Come on in and sit down. I want to talk to you for a bit."

He didn't want to talk. He didn't want to just sit or stand. He looked down the empty road and ran. He ran veering off into the open fields that stretched for miles around the farmhouse. They'd been plowed the day before and his sneakers pumped through the thick, black earth as it clung to them making his run heavy and burdened. His nostrils filled with the suffocating smell of soil as Benjamin sweat and gasped his way further and further from the house. The earth growing heavier on him, wanting to drag him down beneath it, calling for an early grave, calling for his heavy heart and soul but Benjamin kept his eyes on the horizon.

Finally, He fell to the ground in exhaustion. The sun had set and he let the velvet quiet of the evening caress him. Benjamin lay on his back and looked up. It looked as if someone had pushed a thousand, a million holes into the night and he felt like he might leak through them and be lost forever.

“Where do you want to be?” The stars asked him, beckoning with their sharp points. “Why don’t you just join us and forget about the earth sticking to your boots. What good is this life? What good will it ever do you? What’s the point?”

“The point is I’m here.” Benjamin spoke out-loud to the sky.

“What good is here?” it answered.

“That’s not the right question. I am here. That’s the reality whether I understand it or not. Maybe when it’s my time and I get there, I’ll feel differently.”

“Why not find out now?”

“That doesn’t work with me. I don’t listen to promises. My mother never made any promises. She always said she didn’t want to live any lies and that’s probably why she left.”

“Why were you born if she was going to leave you?” the sky inquired.

Benjamin shifted onto his elbows, letting them sink into the earth and thought for a moment.

“She didn’t know she was going to leave.” he replied. “And I don’t feel guilty about it. I didn’t do anything to make her leave...if that’s what your getting at.” He pointed angrily at the sky.

“Fair enough”

“I came out here to try to hate her for leaving but now that I’m talking about it I realize I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“Hate her.” He got up and started pacing back and forth “I’m just going to miss her.”

“You could still join us”

Benjamin stopped pacing and looked down at his feet, letting his tousel of brown curls fall over his eyes. “No. Not now. Thank you. I will when it’s time. Just like everything. When it’s time.”

He laid back down staring at the sky, letting the sharp points fuse and grow dull, draining into black. His eyes grew heavy and he fell asleep. He dreamt of his mother, remembering things from when he was a baby. Her soft curves and warmth. How she smelled of salt and straw. How her hair hung around him like a waterfall of brown tickling and protecting him. He never saw her face but felt her hands warm and cradling and the soft thud of her heart in his ears.

Benjamin woke with her smell still in his nostrils and he cried. He cried for her leaving and he cried for the years he would never have with her. He cried until there was nothing left and he was an empty shell on this empty earth. When he was done, he lifted his head, eyes swollen and red, and saw a figure making it's way across the field toward him. It was a scarecrow.

"I'm hallucinating or I'm dead." Benjamin thought to himself as the scarecrow hung over him with it's limp straw arms and hollow eyes. "Are you the devil?" Benjamin asked. It shook it's head no. "Are you an angel?" Again it shook it's head no.

"We are the earth and we have heard your crying." It answered in a voice that sounded like wind in the grass. "We have felt your pain and sadness. We have tasted your tears and are here to help you."

"Help me? How? And what will need to be traded for your help?"

"Nothing" replied the scarecrow. "The earth gives freely and takes freely. It doesn't make bargains. It just is."

The scarecrow leaned down and took Benjamin's hands and plunged them into the earth. His head flew back against his shoulders and his eyes went wide in amazement. He felt joy and power and love and most of all, he didn't feel alone. He knew that from that point on that he would never be again.

"Thank you" he said to the scarecrow. It nodded and walked back toward the middle of the field to take it's spot amidst the crows.

Benjamin got up and looked toward the farmhouse. A dull mustard stain in the middle of the freshly tilled fields. The sun was beginning to burn hot and his uncle and sister would be worrying about him. He looked down at his hands that were so filthy he couldn't tell his nails from his fingers. Dry crusts of blood clung to his wrists where his fingernails had dug into the palms of his hands as he cried for the loss of his mother. But that was all over now...he had been reborn and was ready to face his new life.

As Benjamin neared the road that ran to the house he thought about how would he explain this to his sister? "It was going to be his secret" He thought. "For now." Maybe one day, he would share it with her. One day when she needed it most like he had.

A cloud of dust moved down the road toward him. The truck stopped, the dust cleared and the door flew open.

"Get in" his uncle said. Benjamin hopped in ready to face whatever was going to come next.

