

Bookshop

The souls of butterflies smell the nicest.

They're small sparkling puffs of memories: simple moments flying amongst emerald blades of grass and stopping at the small daisies between. Their souls don't stink of death.

Most human souls smell so strongly of death that it blankets everything else about them. They can't stop speaking, can't stop bleeding regrets, bleeding losses, until their stories turn pale and hollow. I usually try to catch a few of their memories before they go rotten.

I carry a decade's worth of good stories in butterfly silk and daisies, grasping them by the beginnings with swirls of wind. There's someone I must share them with and a place I must go back to, so I float along, pulling the stories behind me.

I arrive at the small town's dock. They've carved the wooden sign into intricate designs to cover up the cracks, and they've replaced the old arcade games with vending machines. Seaside shops glow with shiny new trinkets and bright lights, so unlike the old bait shops from decades before. Still, the scent of wanderlust lingers softly over the younger sailors, a thick, nearly opaque fog prodding at their rosy cheeks and stinging their hope-filled eyes. The fog catches sight of me and settles.

His name is Warren. He used to like telling stories of the sea. I settle on the wooden planks beside him.

“It’s all over,” he says to me in lieu of a hello, looking out across the shore. “I s’ppose I can go anywhere I want, eh?”

“I guess so,” I reply absently. I gather swirls of clouds from the sky and drag them closer to the sea, feeling them turn to ocean mist and fall away from my grasp. I didn’t come here to speak to Warren. He doesn’t say very much anymore.

“You can, too, boy.”

“Suppose so.” I smell Warren’s wistfulness spilling into the cool sea air. Grimacing, I pull a gust from the waves.

The wind whistles through us, and I feel like Warren’s narrowing his eyes at me. Which is stupid. He doesn’t have eyes.

“Where d’ya think I should go?” He asks me, his voice coarse, as if every word drags its way across a gravel road.

I don’t say anything, but I listen.

“Yer right, kinda. Nowhere left to go, really. Spent my whole life going and learning and not enough time coming back and knowing. I learned so many languages, saw so many things all over the world.” His whisper was hoarse. “Thought myself a deep man. Thought experience made ya complex, made ya better. Turns out I just skimmed the surface. I learned things, but I never stuck around long enough to really *get* them.”

I relax my thoughts for a while, letting them spread out in the wind, floating above rooftops and feeling the scent of salty, ocean-chilled air wash through me. It’s the feeling of

Warren, of the ocean and a stinging in the air, a thick, thick atmosphere that wraps around and crushes you.

Warren will never tell me how he died. I don't need to ask. His hazy memories hang around him like a cement noose, and he constantly floats in himself, in that sickening sludge.

In the distance, I see a gust of sky blue memories rise from a tree.

"You think that was a bluejay?" Bird souls are always hard to differentiate, all of them lilting and free and colored with memories of clouds and treetops.

"What's a bluejay?" Warren asks, sounding tired. He always seems tired. "Been dead for a while. I only remember the important things now."

I frown, or I try to, anyway. I've been here far longer than Warren, but I suppose it'd be rude to point that out.

A cruel part of me wants to scoff, wants to ask him what "important things" he remembers and point out that every "important thing" is just a different regret, that he'd keep forgetting everything besides the regrets he holds so dear and eventually dissolve into the atmosphere, his final breath just another wheeze of self-pity.

Instead, I ask, "What do I smell like?"

Warren sighs. "I don't remember the name of it."

I seep in Warren's soul for a second longer. Sometimes, Warren's stories are vibrant: memories of foreign festivals and the joy of docking and traveling and the peace of the sea. With every passing day, Warren seems to sail further away from those stories. I reenact them in pictures in the clouds and shapes in the wind. If I forget, no one will remember.

Hours pass. The ocean below my foggy companion calms, and I clear the sky to match. There's time to spare yet before I need to meet with my friend.

It's a lovely day to go to the park.

I watch children tackle each other in a race to climb to the top of the jungle gym, muddy sneakers squeaking on the painted metal. The colors of the playground are bright, but the eyes of the children are brighter.

A child slips and scrapes his knee on the ground beneath. A soft soul named Jolie kisses the wound, sending a warm puff of wind over teary eyes and bloody legs.

"That was nice of you," I say.

"Oh." Her voice sounds quieter than it used to be. Colder, too. "Hello, dear. Thank you. I do what I can. Sit with me, sit with me. Just for a second."

She ushers careful autumn breezes through the sun-kissed hair of a freckled little girl. She'd usually whisper short stories about each child as they skipped up to their parents to leave, but today she's silent. I remember her stories for her.

I swirl them together in the sky: the pink of a doll's ripped tutu, the purple of a small bruise, the blue of the old plastic slide.

"A sunset? Oh, *darling*, for me?" Jolie sounds like she's smiling.

It doesn't make it easier.

"So you know, then, don't you?" Jolie's voice gets quieter.

It's dumb, that it doesn't get easier, no matter how many times it happens.

"I'm fading."

"I know." I force my voice through a sharp hiss of wind. Where Jolie used to feel like memories of fondness at first words and delight at first steps, she's now just the cold feeling of a hospital and an unnatural fullness, like an IV pumping a body swollen. She's cold. Not refreshing

cold, but prickly cold, like cold alcohol sterilizing skin and leaving shivers and uncertainty in its transparent track.

“You’d think an old woman like me would be alright with passing. But I can’t stop thinking about it.” Her voice sounds like the soft beep of a machine.

“I know.” I refuse to look at her.

“I’m forgetting. Rather quickly, too.”

“Yeah.”

“In a hospital. In a hospital, I died. Nasty business, that. They really should’ve just kept me at home,” she sighs wistfully, pausing. The pink and orange sky spills onto the playground in front of us. “Did I have a son? I don’t remember anymore.”

“His name is Cody. You liked the way his hair was in a perfect little blonde cowlick when he was born.” The words feel like they rip me apart as I say them.

“Oh yes, that’s right, isn’t it? I would’ve liked to see his kids.” Jolie is looking at the sunset. Or, I hope she is. I hope she isn’t looking at me. “I’m sorry, dear.”

“For what?” I ask, but I know.

She chuckles. “When I first came here, you told me not to get too caught up in my death, or I’d start to fade. Grief is powerful. Endings are powerful. So powerful they swallow up the rest of the story. I’m sorry I couldn’t stay with you longer, dear. Or, maybe not ‘dear’; maybe ‘old friend’ would be better.”

“‘Dear’ is perfectly fine,” I reply, and I feel like Jolie is smiling at me.

I cradle purple and pink clouds in the sunset above. Jolie watches on in cold silence. She reeks of death, but I don’t try to fight it.

“How long do you reckon you’ll stay for, dear?” Jolie asks softly.

As long as butterfly souls continue to flutter from green fields. As long as new people join me, with stories too big for them to hold forever.

“I’ll stay as long as stories need to be told.” I paint Jolie’s stories in the sky.

“And you? What about your story? I never asked.” There’s more regret in her voice, and it clings to me, bitter and cold.

“Mine doesn’t have an ending. Not one I know, anyway. No ending then, no ending now.” My admission hangs in the air. Jolie is silent, waiting, so I continue. “I was a young kid. Didn’t have any regrets, didn’t have any grief. I just... chased birds and ran in fields of reeds and caught butterflies. I didn’t have an ending. I just fell asleep... in a garden... all dandelions.”

“Is that what you smell like? Dandelions? You kept asking.” Jolie sounds tired.

“Yeah.”

“What’s a dandelion?”

“It’s a type of—” I cut myself off. “Forget it.”

“I will, dear,” Jolie’s voice is the most somber I’ve ever heard it. “I will.”

We both turn towards the sunset, watching the rising darkness wring Jolie’s stories dry. The night brings a chill in the air, and by the time I turn away from the sky, Jolie’s warmth is nowhere to be found.

“Goodbye, old friend,” I whisper.

There’s no response.

I collect Jolie’s forgotten stories from the sky, and I continue on, floating past an emptier playground and waiting for the cold night to pass over me. When the morning comes, I’ll meet my friend. Even so, the fluorescent light of the quiet streets feels just a bit lonely.

I watch the sun rise over a small bookshop with crooked letters hanging above the door. The bell doesn't chime as I come in, and the door doesn't creak.

The dusty old shelves are filled to the brim with books, arranged in crooked and disorganized shapes. Piles of books lie in small mounds, their spines worn and their ink faded. Streams of sunlight flutter through the blinds and flecks of dust dance in the light, floating around the shop like small stars.

In the mesmerizing dances of these unsung stars, I find a familiar soul, shaping the settled dust into hearts and pictures on the covers of books.

"Good morning," I say.

"Hello, hello *hello*! You're a bit late! I've been waiting *weeks*!" Leo greets me enthusiastically. I continue to look down the aisles, checking for new marks in the worn shelves and new spines in the rows of novels. "'Good morning Leo, it's been a decade. I missed you ever so dearly, Leo, how are you?' Why *thank you*, Julian, it's *so nice* of you to ask."

"I didn't ask—"

"Yes, well I've actually been getting quite a tad frustrated with people while I've been waiting for you in this bookshop. A lot of adults have this awful tendency to start a book and skip straight to the end. It's a waste, is what it is. Shameful, honestly. A travesty, an absolute insult—!"

"Get to the point, Leo, please."

"Only because you asked so nicely. I've started thinking recently—well, sometime in the past decade—about what exactly makes us fade, and here's what I've come up with. Adults fade. Children don't."

"And why's that?"

“Think about it, Julian. Children have the terrible tendency of getting bored with a book after reading its first chapters. So do adults, but adults have the even more terrible tendency to skip to the end anyway, just to see how it turns out. Children hop from one beginning to the next, completely content without an ending. Adults are obsessed with endings, and it swallows them whole.” Leo begins to get worked up, and the dust from the covers of old books and crooked shelves rises into the morning sun, swirling above me.

I tend to entertain Leo’s theories, even if I don’t completely believe them.

“Are you and I still children, then?”

“Yeah,” Leo hums. “I mean, what makes a kid a kid? Maybe it’s not the ignoring of an ending, but just the quiet belief in a happy ending.”

The words still me. Leo allows me a rare moment of silence. In the distance, I see a gust of sky blue memories rise from a tree.

“You think I believe in happy endings?” I finally look at Leo.

“I don’t know, do you?”

I think about the old stories I hold close to me, about Jolie’s memories of holding her children for the first time, about Warren’s memories of diving into icy water and feeling the thrill of the sea in his blood. They’re snapshots of life, small bursts of joy. I only tell the butterfly stories of human souls.

I love those stories, and I love the souls they came from. When the soul fades, I wish them farewell, and it’s lonely, but it’s not grief.

“Is it wrong to?” I ask.

“The opposite, I think.” Leo laughs. “I think people *should* believe in happy endings, regardless of whether they exist or not. Everyone should. It makes the journey so much more

fun. It's sad, that somewhere, when you aren't looking, you grow up and you stop believing.

Then again, you and I didn't exactly get to grow up. Thank God for that." Leo is smiling at me.

I grin back.

"Thank God we didn't grow up," Leo repeats.

There are only stories, wisps of experiences and emotions that are greater than themselves. All we can do is stand idly by, catching what charming willows of life we can. There are no gods here.

"Thank God," I reply anyway.

"So? Julian, what do I smell like on this fine, fine day?" Leo does a complicated twirl, and the movement flips the weary yellowed pages of the open books surrounding him.

It's our test, a simple question to check our memories of small stories, of bird souls and butterfly souls and meadows, of "important things."

The familiar feeling of Leo drapes over me, warm and inviting.

"Apple cinnamon." I snort. "I cannot believe your last memory is just some *pie*."

Leo is beaming anyway. "And you still smell as flowery and dandelion-y as ever, Julian. Now, do you want to go first, or shall I? I've had an absolutely wild decade, absolutely insane."

"As if you're the only one with stories, Leo," I say, settling myself in a corner of the bookstore. There is a decade of stories to trade, and forever to trade them.

A small bookshop in a small town is one of the only places that doesn't smell like death. The scent of apple pie sticks to some of the old novels, and the scent of dandelions seems to be painted on every shelf, even if there are no customers to notice it.

This story is my favorite: a young teenager with bags under his bright eyes, dressed in old ratty jackets, climbs on shelves and reads books covered in dust. I sit on the carpet, listening to

him narrate classics in terrible accents and offer rambling commentary. We collect scenes we like, little paragraphs of inked joy on old pages, and ignore everything else.

Two children in a room with infinite stories, forever.