

My eyes flicker open reluctantly, as if I was waking from an eternal slumber, senses recalibrating as the cold, hard ground sends chills through my body. For some reason, it felt odd waking up, as if it were something foreign to me.

"Excuse me?" an elderly voice says in concern. "Excuse me, son, are you alright?"

Mustering what little energy I had, I sit upright, rolling my sore neck around as I face the elderly man, taking note of his large-lensed glasses and grey flat cap. He offers me a bony hand, one with a firm grip as he helps me back onto my feet.

"Thanks for that," I yawn, still drowsy as I observe my surroundings, the place scattered with dozens of trees and flowers. "Where- where am I?"

The old man looks in amusement. "The town gardens. You're not lost, are you, son?"

I nod, given there was no point in lying apart from saving my pride.

"You must be from out of town," he says without a hint of judgement. "I'll take you around if you'd like, show you around."

In another absence of words, I nod to his offer, a kind smile I couldn't refuse.

As he took me around town, the man, Mr Grundy, turned out to be a softer soul than I'd imagined. Almost every place he showed me was described with only the gentlest of words and the sweetest of compliments. Every passerby was given a friendly nod, one that left them with a smile as they walked by. Grundy seemed to be a well-known and liked figure in the town, one that imparted kindness to everyone he met. Including me.

"You wouldn't want something to eat, would you?"

Surprisingly, I didn't feel hungry in the slightest, even if I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten. "Not really," I shake my head as we continue along the path.

He didn't ask many questions, showing me the same compassion he showed those he was familiar with, something that brought me a strange sense of ease. The town itself was simple but it had its own quirks that made it stand out. For example, some stretches of the streets were made of cobblestone rather than the usual black asphalt and several streetlights were stylised to represent lamps. The whimsical sense of discovery is cut short, however, as we pass a large plot of land, one filled with tombstones of various shapes and sizes. Being near the graveyard was enough to bring a sense of gloom and dread to me, feeling a cold breath on my shoulder.

"You smell of death, son," Grundy says in his gentle tone, stark in contrast to his words.

At first, I assumed it was a joke regarding my sudden rigidness, but one look into his withered eyes is enough to tell me otherwise. "*What?*" I ask, confused by his words.

He shakes his head as if to apologise. "It's just something I noticed when we first met," he explains calmly. "I thought I was mistaken but now that we're here....I realise I was right."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, my confusion only exacerbated. "How do I *smell* like death?"

He chuckles heartily. "'Smell' was figurative, son. But..."

"But what?!"

"Take a look at the graveyard and tell me what you see."

Confused by what suddenly felt like a fever dream, I glance over at the cemetery, squinting my eyes as I look across the barren landscape. Among the still tombstones, something moves, catching my attention as my eyes immediately fixate on the area of movement, widening. An opaque black mist covers the graveyard, fuming slowly from the place of burial. I take a step back, shocked that I could see such a thing, even more shocked upon realising Grundy somehow knew I would be able to see the smog.

"How did you-"

"Now take a look at yourself," he says simply, his demeanour unwavering by the current happenings.

I pull my hands up, looking down at them in horror. The same mist emits from my hands and forearms, slowly disappearing as it rises. "No- I'm not- I can't be-" I stammer, no longer able to comprehend what was going on. "If I was I wouldn't be- How could you tell?!"

His answer remains ambiguous. "Age tends to teach you these kinds of things."

With confusion and incomprehension swirling through my mind, it manifests a fire in me, anger taking over. "No! This has to be some kind of- some kind of *mindfuck*! Who are *you* to tell me that I'm *dead*?!"

"I don't know. But who are *you*?" he asks, smiling warmly.

The words hit me like a truck, stricken me with a hollow dread. I didn't know who I was, my name was unknown to me as it was to Grundy. In fact, now that I thought about it, I couldn't remember anything, solely functioning off instinct and gut feeling until now. I fall to my knees, staring at the ground in shock. Was I really dead? Was my lack of memory a sign that Grundy was telling me the truth and I just couldn't handle it?

"If I'm *dead*, then why am I here?" I murmur, still trying to take in the information.

"Perhaps that's something you'll find out sooner or later," Grundy's voice fades.

I quickly turn back to face him, only to find that he was no longer there. Glancing side to side, I find no trace of him, as though he'd vanished into thin air. This day was getting freakier by the minute. Just to make sure, I sprint around the block several times, searching for any sign of Grundy, though to no avail. Left with nothing but a hollow feeling, I wander through the streets, the evening rays of sunlight glistening on the windows of the shops and homes. I felt somewhat defeated by the news, still having trouble coming to grips with it. Could someone who was dead walk among the living again? With doubt embedded in me, I couldn't tell what was real or supernatural anymore. I dump myself on a nearby bench to sulk, burying my face in my palms as I sigh heavily. I raise my hand, looking at the source of black mist with uncertainty.

From evening to nightfall, I wander the streets, still trying to comprehend the mist that surrounded itself around me. I'd asked around where Grundy had gone but it seemed that none of the townsfolk knew either, the man's whereabouts having always been this enigmatic apparently. Oddly enough, none of them noticed the mist I produced from my body, only making me more confused about the whole situation. It felt too real to be a nightmare but at the same time, it felt too dreamlike to be reality. My mind was still swimming from my state of limbo, but a rising commotion quickly takes my mind off things, getting me onto my feet as I watch droves of people running away and into the fray. Curious myself, I run into the disturbance, a warm light radiating as I get closer. Pushing through the crowd, I

realise what the glow was as the building in front is set ablaze, fire spewing from windows as a thick smoke rises above.

"What happened?!" I shout to the woman next to me, the racket of the crowd deafening. "Fire broke out!" she shouts back, her face red in panic. "There's still people in there!"

Something about that phrase doesn't sit right with me and by instinct, I swim further through the crowd and towards the fire. Several firefighters and barriers are in the way, but I pay no heed to them, pulling up my hoodie and pulling it over my face as I vault over and bolt towards the flaming building like a moth to a lamp. I can hear several muffled shouts behind me, but I keep running, crashing through the door and into the ablaze furnace. The thick smoke makes it hard to navigate through the building as pieces of flaming debris lay in front of me. Snapping back to my senses, fear and regret takes over as I berate myself for allowing myself to jump into the flames without a second thought. Just as I'm deciding to turn heel and head out the building, the sound of crunching can be heard from above and as I look up, a large chunk of the stairway comes crashing down. I shut my eyes and brace myself uselessly, yelling helplessly as it comes down upon me.

My shout trails comically, however, as I open my eyes, finding myself unscathed by the flames and fallen rubble, the mist from my body a more intense black and covering more of my body, though it slowly fades back to simple mist from my hands and forearms as I stand atop the debris that was to crush me. Though taken aback, I quickly snap back to reality, focussing on navigating the building. The shouting from outside deafens as cries for help from the inside become audible, my heart pounding in my chest as I get closer and closer. I ram myself into the door the scream was coming from, though it refuses to budge. I try again several times, only to be met with the same result.

"Damn it!" I exclaim, throwing my fists down in frustration.

The persistent smoke I carried with me catches my eye, a sudden idea funneling into my head. I grip my hands tightly, letting my mind go into autopilot as it had done earlier. Just as my gut had predicted, the mist takes over my body, enveloping me into a black haze, my body shifting state from solid to gaseous. The ghost-like state feels odd, as if I'd changed planes of existence, but somehow I just *knew* how to switch into and control this new form, only adding more fuel to this mystery of mine. Spreading myself thin, I slip through the cracks of the doorframe, emerging into the room as my smoke body swirls back into a solid form. The screaming had faded as I look in horror at the burnt corpse before me, a dark, hulking figure standing over it, their body covered in sharp fangs and wrapped in tentacle-like appendages.

"Too late, I'm afraid," their voice rasps, turning to me to reveal a darkened face behind the cloak of their hood. "Or are you just in time?"

"Enough with the cryptic shit, what the fuck is going on?!" I yell in anger, charged by the despair of being too late.

Their body reacts disgustingly, the appendages shifting as they pull out a dark orb from the corpse beside them, feeding it to the mouth formed by their fangs shifting.

"I'm a soul collector. You should know that, we've met," they scoff, though my confused expression is telling. "Perhaps, you need a reminder."

Long and sharp fingers grab hold of my hand, sending me into a flurry of disjointed memories, the ones that were somehow lost to me until now. I can't make out anything at first, but everything slowly starts to become clear as imagery of fire and smoke similar to the building come to mind. Visions of an obscured figure reaching out to me as I turn around, abandoning them bring a sense of shame, even if I couldn't quite make out what was happening. The slideshow of recollection ends abruptly, as a chunk of flaming debris hits me, causing everything to go black and bring my perspective back to the real world. I pull the hand off, staring in shock at the collector.

"Those- those were my *memories*?"

"Moments before your death," the collector's eyes pierce through me, even if I couldn't see them. "Moments of *sin, betrayal*."

With my past piecing back together thanks to my reclaimed memories, I stare blankly, realising Grundy was right all along; I actually *was* dead. What made it even worse was how dishonourably I'd died, abandoning someone who seemed important, though that part of my memory still remained obscured.

"I- I don't- What-," I sputter.

"That brings us to business," the collector's voice scrapes, pulling my arm. "Reclaiming an escaped soul soul."

By habit I hadn't even formed, I dissipate my arm into smoky mist, yanking it away from the reaper, much to their annoyance. Somehow, the last words shared with Grundy start to echo through my head, emboldening me.

*If I'm dead, then why am I here?*

*Perhaps that's something you'll find out sooner or later.*

Now was that moment.

Staring at the charred remains of the soul I couldn't save, I see the obscured figure I'd left behind, the vivid imagery still fresh in my mind. I had to come to grips that in life, I was probably a terrible person, an asshole for leaving someone to die in an act of selfishness, even in the face of danger. But that was in life. Now that I'd seen who I was, my original sin, I was determined to do better in death to make up for my wrongdoings, however long that may take.

"Go to hell," I respond, taking a step back from the collector.

"You *first*," they rasp mockingly, trying to grab hold of me once more, though I had anticipated the soul harvester would try to drag me back into the land of the dead, evaporating myself and joining the smoke pouring out the building. "Run all you want, boy! We'll hunt you until the ends of the earth!"

We. That word wasn't very comforting to hear, but it was the least of my concerns as the howling gales pick me up, dispersing me over the town with the smog. It's a matter of minutes before I descend back to the ground, a hillside overlooking the town. What a day. In more than one way, this was what my life was now, or rather, what my afterlife was. From what I could gather from the ugly mug of collector, I'd somehow come back from the dead, escaping what I assumed to be hell. Maybe I did deserve to be there for such a cowardly and weak final act. With a new perspective and some fractured memories, I knew I had to do good, not to redeem myself, but to use my new lease on earth for a meaningful purpose. Even if I had death's enforcers on my back and could never stop running, the mist, my new best friend, would see me through in my quest.

I may be a ghost of my past self, but that's a good thing.