

## Songs:

### "Ghost's Lament"

Oh, I'm fading fading,  
My world is graying graying,  
And I keep on straying straying  
From the path that I am taking.

To all the travelers whose shadows wander in here,  
I plead with you to heed me through bloody black tears.  
I sing now a tale of betrayal and fear,  
Hear now my humming, lend me your ears.

My song keeps me company and brings peace of mind,  
Dream away the life I have now left behind.  
Murder now my heart in one long ringing blast,  
My only friends are now the lake and my shattered past.

Trust is still broken, yet I can forgive.  
If I knew the imprisoned, I would let them live.  
Yet as for my killer, envy down to his soul -  
He deserves even worse than brimstone and coal.  
I used to serve justice, suffered and forgave,  
Now I seek my vengeance from beyond the grave.

My song keeps me company and brings peace of mind,  
Dream away the life I have now left behind.  
Murder now my heart in one long ringing blast,  
My only friends are now the lake and my shattered past.

I dream of my past life, lighthearted and fun,  
Been a couple decades since I've seen the sun.  
Wake up brokenhearted, I scream and I weep,  
His voice calls my name, so inwards madness does seep.

My song keeps me company and brings peace of mind,  
Dream away the life I have now left behind.  
Murder now my heart in one long ringing blast,  
My only friends are now the lake and my shattered past.

They say stay away for good reason,  
Many a tale has been told.  
All year round no matter the season,  
The water is bone-numbingly cold.  
They say the woman always grieves there,  
Lamenting, she stands, all alone.  
Don't stay when she cries that "You don't care!"  
Or for you there'll soon be no more hope.

My song keeps me company and brings peace of mind,  
Dream away the life I have now left behind.  
Murder now my heart in one long ringing blast,  
My only friends are now the lake and my shattered past.

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"It's Good to Be King (Kingsley's Anthem)"

Oh, it's good to be king  
I'm the one pulling the strings  
And you know I can do anything  
That I want (anything that I want)

Baby, I'm the one runnin' this town  
So don't you dare go messin' around  
You are unaware of my ability  
Allow me to curb your imbecility  
So let's have a bit of civility

Oh, it's good to be me  
'Cause I don't need no crown or no ring  
And I can get away with most anything  
That I want (anything that I want)

Baby, I'm the one runnin' this town  
So don't you dare go messin' around  
You're just unaware of my ability  
Allow me to curb your imbecility  
So let's have a bit of civility

I'm the one that holds the ace (I'll bet all in)  
Everybody knows my face (so you can't win)  
Don't even try to make your case (objection overruled)  
You know there's no escape (darling, I disapprove-)  
You know that I can seal your doom with a kiss  
There's no way that you're gonna wanna miss this!

Baby, I'm the one runnin' this town  
So don't you dare go messin' around  
You are unaware of my ability  
Allow me to curb your imbecility  
So let's have a bit of civility

Your best friend forever - that's who I'll be  
If you stay on my good side,  
If you're a threat, then believe you me  
You're in for the ride of your life!

(spoken) Game, Set, Match - Checkmate!

## "Into The Ground"

You know there's no place left for this to go  
Into the ground  
Chased your idea to the end of the road  
Into the ground

You made her think she was mad  
Ripped away everything that she had

And now you claim to win the game  
Things are simply not the same

It's time to face the truth.

You know there's no place left for you to hide  
Into the ground  
People aren't gonna stay on your side  
Into the ground

You thought that you had a plan  
I know you're barely a man  
So don't pretend this isn't what it'll be...  
Hands up, facing me

Into the ground, into the ground  
You tore their lives apart  
Into the ground, into the ground  
No brand-new start  
Into the ground, into the ground  
You never had a heart

Hands up or you're going down  
The game is up, it's over now

And you'll never ever ever escape the fate for which you are bound

Into the ground.

## "Escape"

Oh, I feel drained, drained, drained  
It's always the same, same, same  
Only ever the mundane, always  
All I ever wanted was to escape

I tap against these walls  
Searching for an echo.  
Looking to break the ice  
Somewhere new I can go.

Do I care if it's good or bad?  
I'm not sure  
Any change would be better  
Than what I had before  
Dear, would you come with me,  
Or would you rather watch me leave?  
Because I can't stay here anymore.

I ache to see blue skies  
Another hill for me to climb  
Instead of stairs, repeating endlessly.  
Treasures for me to find  
And I can't see a reason why  
This place is somewhere we should be.

Somewhere I can hear my voice  
Somewhere I truly have a choice.

Do I care if it's good or bad?  
I'm not sure  
Any change would be better  
Than what I had before  
Dear, would you come with me,  
Or would you rather watch me leave?  
Because I can't stay here anymore.

And I'm terrified, it's true.  
Leaving the stability I'm used to.  
And honey, we both know I'd miss you.  
So please don't go  
I can't leave here on my own

Do I care if it's good or bad?  
I'm not sure  
Any change would be better  
Than what I had before  
Dear, would you come with me,  
Or would you rather watch me leave?  
Because I can't stay here anymore

Do I care if it's good or bad?  
I'm not sure  
Any change would be better  
Than what I had before  
Dear, just say you'll go with me,  
'Cause I don't wanna see you leave  
Because I can't stay here anymore.

## "Faraway"

Oh life needs naught but balance  
And I need you for mine  
Maybe I was always helpless  
But now I have all the time

In the world  
So stay awhile and watch the stars whirl  
With me

I'm still drifting  
No gravity now, everything's lifting  
I lost my ground  
If only you'd come around again.

I'm faraway  
Underwater, nothing to say  
Clinging to a happier fate  
Maybe we're both to blame  
Maybe I lost my way

It's all quiet, all these secrets left to keep  
Always tired, but I never seem to sleep  
My lonely heart's got no drum left to march along to  
I could bring myself to speak  
But I've no friends left I could sing my songs to.

I want to sleep, I want to dream  
In my head still echoes all those distant screams  
Saying what I want and what I ought to need  
My mask begins to unravel at the seams

I'm faraway  
Underwater, nothing to say  
Clinging to a happier fate  
Maybe we're both to blame  
Maybe I lost my way

I want nothing more than finally find you  
But I'm still damsel, frozen where I stand  
I'm silent now and yet so see-through  
If I could've only drawn a better hand.

Maybe I lost my way  
All this time and nothing fades.  
At least I have my dreams to comfort me –  
I'll simply wait 'til someone comes for me.



## “Telephone”

Hello?  
Can you hear me?  
Hm, maybe I need to be a little bit louder  
Connection’s bad, not that you’ll ever be prouder  
And I guess that’s my fault  
Because I always balk  
At even getting groceries  
Feels like most of me’s  
Asleep all the time  
Should be a crime  
To feel so tired  
Even when wired –

Two cups of coffee already today  
Scared to call, wasn’t sure what to say  
I kinda feel like I wanna cut everybody off  
Wanna see if they’d worry, would that be enough?  
...no, that’d be mean -

Um, hello?  
New phone, who’s this?  
Everyday it feels like there’s something I missed  
Even if I checked everything off my list  
But at least I remembered to eat today  
Not feeling great, but I’ll be okay  
And I keep on forgetting my best friend’s names  
I hope they understand that I still like them the same

Two cups of coffee already today  
Barely out of bed – “yeah, I’m on my way”  
Three repeats, I still don’t know what someone’s trying to say  
But I called just to ask if you’re doing okay

Because I know that this week has been rough  
You’re strong, but you’re terrible at playing tough  
And I’m here, if by any chance you need me  
Even if I’m asleep by the time you text me  
I’ll read it the next morning, try to give advice  
And if you don’t want that, I’ll just listen and be nice  
Just let me know if there’s something I can do  
Because the last thing I want is to accidentally hurt you.

(spoken) And, uh – are you still coming tomorrow?

I'm gonna order the food for it, and I know you like the chicken tacos instead of the beef ones, so, um, yeah. And sorry for rambling earlier.

“Cozy and Cold”

The breeze blows through the open window  
I'm still missing you  
I'm always cold, and often blue  
Midsummer, and you'd still be so cool.

I'm cozy, and so cold  
On this September afternoon  
Teaching myself to be more bold  
As lonesome songbirds warble tunes

I wanna learn how you do it  
If you'd teach me your ways  
Have fire in me, and know when to cool it  
I'd be cozy through these autumn days.

I'm cozy, and so cold  
On this September afternoon  
Teaching myself to be more bold  
As lonesome songbirds warble tunes

I know you said to just calm down  
And that always sets me off  
I'd be more sorry if you were around  
And I'd apologize soft.

And so I put the heater on full blast  
And wear my sweaters, bundle up.  
I know our friendship's meant to last  
If we both bring the right stuff.

I'm cozy, and so cold  
On this September afternoon  
Teaching myself to be more bold  
As lonesome songbirds warble tunes



## Dialogues:

### *Intro - The Power of Two*

It had been five minutes. Five whole minutes. Quincy let out an exasperated sigh, wiping his charcoal-covered hands on the front of his apron, and put down the pencil. Snatching up his incessantly ringing phone, he finally answered.

"And what, pray tell, would be the reason for you calling me at-" he paused, glancing at the nearby digital clock, and continued, "-10:35 at night?"

Olly grinned, fiddling with the car radio so she'd be easier to hear. "Do I ever need a reason to annoy you? Besides, I know you don't really sleep on the weekends anyway. What masterpiece you working on this time, huh?" She kicked up her feet on the dashboard, tilting the rearview mirror down to fix her hair.

"It isn't all that important - I'm just trying to figure out a new way to draw brickwork," Quincy explained, shifting the phone to his other ear. "You only ever call me for two reasons, and I've already said I'm not going to Alison's party. So, what weird thing did you discover this time?"

Olly blinked once or twice, pausing for a long moment. "...wow. Okay, Sherlock. Okay, so, you know the old Kingsley cottage?"

"Just because I do art doesn't mean I keep up with *Architecture Weekly*, Olympia."

She pouted for a moment. "No, I - that's the point, Quince! It was abandoned absolute ages ago. It's where my aunt disappeared."

"Oh, you mean the judge." He frowned, thinking, when suddenly something in his eyes seemed to light up with realization. "Wait, you're related to them, aren't you?" He started to laugh. "You -"

Olly's face had flushed a bright pink. "No, no! I am NOT family to that blond brat! Stop laughing and listen, dummy!"

She couldn't see his face, but the smugness was evident in his voice. "You mean someone who can still draw a bird better than you."

"Whatever. The mayor was incredibly hush-hush about it - he wouldn't even sell it after whatever happened there, and I know why! The place is totally haunted!"

"And how, exactly, do you expect to prove that?"

"I can, and I will. Meet me at the courthouse in ten, Q-Bert. You can see it for yourself." And with that, she hung up.

## Poems:

### "Enter Emmett"

My cousin's always driving -  
He's a traveler of sorts.  
Seems like he's always dying  
To get to other ports.  
His hat's always pulled forward  
Just so, to hide his eyes.  
I never know where he's going -  
Even to him, it might be a surprise!

### "embers"

fire holds ability in its hypnotic gaze.  
capacity to heal - also, capacity to raze.  
its glow is pure and wholesome, source of a song to sing -  
but burning pain results from an excess of a good thing.

the amount differs from life to death -  
warm your soul  
or  
steal your breath.

a tool, whether be it meek or be it bold  
(good or evil? depends on  
the hands that power hold.)

### "untitled"

I remember -  
Fair was the weather,  
Sun barely over the hills  
As I stood still.

Frozen as a photograph

Broken like a phonograph  
Mind blank and white  
Red-blue lights in my eyes.

I tasted smoke  
Began to choke  
Sound too far away  
To reach as it may.

The balance point of this purgatory bubble  
Was seeing his poor hand jutting out from the rubble.

“his. (a moment, pt. 1)”

all is quiet, and calm, and of motion bereft  
save soft moonlight and the gentlest of depths.  
yet sleep won't come -  
face and throat burn with anger livid  
and pain, betrayal and blood throbbing vivid  
a noise like a crash, a catastrophe in motion.  
“report” is, by far, too gentle a notion  
for the sound of a world shattering,  
a snake's venom in the form of happening,  
tearing skin and letting pain run loose.  
her face, outlined in red ink, cries  
lowered into water, jade green as her eyes -  
pale lips mouth a language inaudible  
as mouth and throat flow ruby.

rest in peace, to a fair judge beloved by all -  
yet the man who was hers, was her final downfall.

“hers. (a moment, pt. 2)”

he glances at his watch again,  
its ticking counts a quiet refrain  
much too loud for this empty room.  
he closes his eyes - he knew this was trouble

his love, his peace - both reduced to rubble,  
his conscience now forever doomed.  
when a soft voice then sings in his ears -  
one that makes his blood boil, yet he longs to hear,  
one that makes his heart soar, yet he loathes and fears.  
he turns, and he cries, "tell me now, who is there?"  
yet nothing responds, only silent air.  
his hands tremble, for now he's certainly sure  
he'll turn some dark corner, and then, behold *her* -

he wants to be wrong, he wants to have lied.  
but she knew too much, on the night that she died.

"shattered"

lies are fickle contraptions,  
some told to help, some told to harm.  
some advocate an action -  
others expertly disarm.

so what constitutes betrayal?  
if not the pain, what then  
but the grief of a lie told on such a large scale  
that you never trust again.

"brisk"

There's frost on the windows.  
It's freezing outside... again.  
I wonder if today will be different.  
I mean, it always is, but will it matter?  
Really matter? Does it ever?  
Only one way to find out.  
I steel myself -  
And step out the door, locking it behind me.  
And I stand on the born-anew, cold morning glow.



## "Possibility"

An empty sheet sits before me.  
Words trying, but not fully forming.  
I chew on my eraser as I debate  
Exactly what to write and say.  
"Nature, future, existence... fish."  
"Tree, desk, ruler... wish."  
It's dumb, but inspiration eludes me yet again,  
As over empty page awaits my currently silent pen.  
I could really write anything, from "infinity" to "nose".  
I guess I could write curse words - but I'd rather not use those.  
I find them rude  
And find them crude  
(not to mention mortifying!)  
I realize - I just wrote a poem!  
I guess it just takes writing!

## "Maggie's Dream Journal, pt. 1"

I just had a dream that was certainly true.  
I'm still scared, but I think I'll describe it to you.  
It was raining outside - I think that's the reason  
That I dreamed of swimming in such a cold season.

And the water was cold, the rain almost sleet -  
When (to my horror) I felt a hand brush my feet.  
Imagine my fear (I thought I was alone,  
But in the depths, I saw eyes staring into my own!)

I let out a shriek  
And rushed to the shore  
(The sky was even more bleak than it had been before)  
I fell on my back, laying amongst the trees,  
My fingers entwined with the dead grass and leaves.

I was still unsure of what I had seen -  
When the water itself began to glow green.  
A woman rose up, floating over jaded cool  
Discolored - like a doll left to rot in a pool.

Her dark curls lay flat, and blood dripped from her head  
She was without a doubt, unmistakably, dead.  
One hand, bluish and bruised, outstretched - then she spoke.  
"Avenge me, avenge me -" and then I awoke.

"Maggie's Dream Journal, pt. 2"

This other dream I've had before.  
I'm home alone, and I open the door -  
And turn, only to find the house in flames.  
The door is gone - no knob, no frame,  
But fire on the walls, from baseboards to seams.  
As I inspect my surroundings, I hear a faint scream.  
And stumble into smoke, searching for the source.  
Every time, I take the same course.  
I find myself in the study; all the books are now ash.  
I see my father, and a stranger - his gaze all aflash  
With golden-eyed anger, and my dad, he yells, "Leave!"  
"Maggie, save yourself! Please forget about me!"  
That's when I wake up, then I cry for a spell.  
And for the rest of the day, I feel rather unwell.

"Winter's Eve"

When the weather starts to freeze  
Something's off about the trees.  
Sky turns grey, and shines like steel -  
Loses summer's colorful appeal.  
Yet an odd elegance it now gains;  
Snow and ice differ greatly from spring's stormy rains.

## “Wreckage”

I want nothing more than to tear out my heart and hand it to you.  
Because I know that you could shelter it better than I ever could -  
Cocooned in gauze and cooling words  
Hidden from the decay and the birds  
Buried deep  
Allowed to sleep  
At least for a little while.  
Sometimes hurts to even smile,  
And I plug the dam as best I can try  
I can't even give you a reason for me to cry.  
As my face burns  
And my clear sight turns  
To watercolors birthed of pain,  
Feels like nothing left of me remains.  
My stomach's queasy  
But no one sees me  
Or hears my breakdown  
Because I won't be a burden now.

## “Study of a Socialite (or Lily's Misconception)”

My mother always told me,  
“Dear, stay away from boys-  
They lie and they mistreat,  
Treat poor women like they're toys.

Stick with your friends instead,  
They won't tend to let you down,  
You'll never be all that misled  
If you have friends around!”

And so I heeded her advice –  
But it turns out girls, too, aren't so nice.  
Although some that I have met stayed true,  
So this is what we plan to do.

We'll have little lies we tell  
To seem like our energetic selves,  
And when parties rear their ugly heads –  
We'll all stay in, and watch movies instead.



## Short Stories:

### “Conversation”

We both sat there, on opposite sides of a table so polished I was almost surprised I couldn't see my reflection in it. The lights were dim, but still brighter than the phone flashlight I had been using to navigate. I blinked, waiting for my eyes to adjust. I wasn't being recorded (at least, I didn't think I was), but this was an interrogation, no matter how much he tried to hide it.

He folded his hands neatly in front of him. He wore gloves, but I knew he probably manicured his nails just like Max did. Or he taught Max to while growing up. But his whole demeanor was much less genuine. Finally, he spoke.

“I hope things have been going well, Ms. Bishop. I am truly regretful we had to meet under these circumstances.”

His voice was warm and reassuring, without a hint of menace or malice. A wolf in sheep's clothing, if there ever was one.

I felt a lump in my throat and tried my best to ignore it - he wouldn't hesitate to have me landed in prison or Meadowbrook if he thought no one would notice. “They... they really haven't, actually.”

He looked the very picture of saintly sympathy. One of my hands curled up into a fist under the table - anything to stop myself from crying, then and there.

“That is certainly sad to hear.”

He closed his eyes and let out a small sigh, looking very much like a disappointed parent. “Now, I understand that you have been through a lot lately. And we both know what happened was a tragedy, it really was.”

I struggled to keep quiet - yet he continued. “Understand that I mean no harm.” My hands began to shake, and my thumb cramped as I dug my fingernails into the palm of my hand. “You have been through a lot of pain, and while that explains your behavior, it does not justify it. These childish amusements-”

I saw red - I stood, hands now in an enraged white-knuckle grip against the side of the table. “Childish amusements? Am I a joke to you?!” I felt pain lace my already sore throat - I stopped yelling, but tears had already started dripping down my face. Of all possible times, I had to cry now?

Although my vision was blurry, I could see that he still seemed calm, unmoved. “Oh dear. I didn't think through my wording properly, did I? You're a perfectly capable young woman. I should've acknowledged that.”

I could only glare at him.

"I am, however, fully aware that this is by no means a joking matter. You do realize that I could easily press charges for breaking and entering, correct?"

I froze. I knew he'd do it in a heartbeat, plus try to frame me for something worse, but for some reason him mentioning it made it all the more terrifying. I forced myself to nod. "Yes, sir." His smile made me feel even more afraid. "Excellent. Now, Ms. Bishop, if you wouldn't mind sitting down, I think I know exactly how to resolve this issue."

I wiped the tears from my eyes as I sat back down, doing my best to compose myself. "I... guess I'll have to listen?"

He drummed his fingers gently on the table. "Unfortunately. Be aware that not everything you heard about me is necessarily true. When someone prefers their privacy, people spin wild rumors - and present things as facts that simply aren't accurate to begin with. Silence tells the loudest truth, so I suggest this; I will drop any and all potential accusations - in fact, I will support your alibi for being here, if anyone asks."

I shifted in my seat as I tried to figure out what he'd want - there had to be a downside, there had to be. "...and what's the catch?"

Ever so slightly, his smile widened. His shadow lengthened, looming as he leaned towards me. "I merely ask you to tell no one of what you have seen, or heard, about me. I did not reach my current status through unsavory means - I worked hard for it. I refuse to lose it to silly campfire stories."

He lowered his voice, and his face suddenly looked stern. "I wish to keep the peace above all else, Ms. Bishop. But make no mistake - there will be consequences for disobeying. Do you understand?"

I hated it. My proof, the evidence to finally set things right - my entire reason for being here was gone. All this effort had been for nothing. "I understand. Sorry for bothering you, Mr. Kingsley." He smiled again. "Oh, it's okay. I'm sure you'll forget all about this misinformation in no time. I'll have someone get you back home. Wouldn't want a young lady out and about in this storm, would we?"

As I got into an actual limousine, I had never felt worse in my life.

## "Keeping Watch"

She was tired. She assumed he had to be tired, too - it had been too long already, walking mile after mile after mile, and she resisted the urge to drop the bag she had just to walk faster, and finally lose the noise.

Oh, right. The noise. She had almost, for a brief, merciful moment, forgotten about it entirely. In trying to forget about their lives for a couple days, they had found the noise instead - a strange, one toned hum that had almost seemed pleasant at first.

"What is that?" She had asked, blinking up at him from their small breakfast - he had gotten the idea to camp in a field in the first place, and set up a picnic blanket so technically, they'd have a picnic-only diet for the whole vacation. "And don't pretend you can't hear it too - you scared me enough last time."

She always enjoyed hearing his laugh, though, even though it was occasionally at her expense. "But it was only a cat last time. One of your cats."

"Aristotle knocked the chair over! A whole chair! Just - listen. Then you can tell me I'm crazy or something."

He laughed again, but did as she asked. After a moment or two, his smile faded, and a quizzical frown sprang up in its place. "Huh. That's... weird. It almost sounds electric, doesn't it?"

"It does... maybe it's a powerline somewhere? Those hum like that."

"I thought there weren't any around here. There aren't any houses around here, at least," he mused, taking a small sip of his coffee. "Maybe we can ask the guide when he comes back."

"I don't think I'll remember to ask by then." And with that, they had given it no further thought. At least until the next morning, when it had gotten louder. This unnerved her, and she told him as much, but there wasn't much either of them could do about it - unless they wanted to walk twenty miles back to where they had left their car, all over a noise.

But now, it wasn't just a noise, lingering in the back of her mind as they pushed on - it was a shaking, like a cricket rubbing its legs to make music. Everything shook - her thoughts, her hands as they adjusted the baseball cap he had bought for her, even his voice, quiet next to her, almost a humming in and of itself.

"Halfway there," he murmured, squeezing her hand. "Did we come from left or right?"

She hesitated, almost too tired to even speak. "Left."

"Okay. Good. You have a great memory, you know that?"

A quiet, hoarse laugh. "You can compliment me when we get out of here."

"Uh, no. When we get out of here, I'm going to sleep, then I'm calling the cops on the forest. Can you arrest an entire forest?"

"Maybe. Put - put the trees in jail," she added, laughing. "Guilty of, uh -"

"Scaring us almost to death. That's a crime. Probably."

They had realized it wasn't just a noise when it had attacked their tent. He had woken her up, his flashlight nearly blinding her. It took her a moment to realize something was wrong - one of the tent's roof support beams poking her in the back. She had opened her mouth to say something, but was silenced by him putting a finger to her lips. "It's outside," he hissed, and she froze immediately, eyes wide.

The humming was everywhere now, and something about it sent a chill up her spine - whatever that thing was, it was big. Her voice was a faint whisper. "...where is it?" In response, he pointed the flashlight to the back wall of the tent.

"Just outside. It's slow. I think it took it the whole night to make it across the field to us. We'll have to outrun it."

"But it's twenty miles - "

"We can walk. We just can't stop, okay? With any luck, we'll bump into the guide, and we'll be home free."

She nodded blankly, grabbing their jackets and hiking bags. He quietly counted to three, before unzipping the tent door as fast as he could, and the two of them fled into the woods, the noise following behind them.

And now they were halfway there. Over halfway there. He had taken a granola bar from this pack and handed it to her, neither of them wanting to break stride for a second - even though they didn't see whatever it was, they could still hear the noise. It could be anywhere.

She had been the first to see the parking lot - she had never expected the sight of concrete to fill her with so much joy. "We made it! We made it!"

The look of blank fatigue on his face melted away a little, a hopeful smile in its place. Both of them sped up, making a beeline for the small red car that seemed almost comically clean compared to them.



And as they pulled out of their spot, driving towards sweet safety, she glanced behind them, and saw it, standing at the edge of the treeline. It looked, for lack of a better description, like the shadow of someone under a blanket - a Halloween sheet ghost made void and filled with that static humming. It lingered amongst the trees, confined there, or maybe scared by the stronger sunlight, then turned, vanishing back into the woods.

Only then did she let herself breathe a little easier. But there was a probing question at the back of her mind:

Would it always stay there?

## “A Voice From the Trees”

It was stupid of me to be excited for that trip, I guess. Derek had invited me out to his cabin for the weekend for some camping - if you could call it that. Fishing, hunting - we were planning on watching the game on Sunday, too. I packed a couple of CDs to listen to on the way there - it was five hours away, but then again, you wouldn't pitch a tent in the middle of a city, right?

I was able to watch the sunset as I drove. I've seen my fair share of sunsets on the road, but this one looked nicer than usual, painting the trees below it. Real novelist vocab, I know, but that's what it looked like. Night didn't settle in until I reached the trees, and the pines were dense enough to block out any light that was there in the first place. I had my high beams turned on, and they still seemed dim.

After driving for an hour or two along a road so bumpy it made corrugated sheet metal feel like polished marble, I saw the hand-painted sign for his house, and turned onto the equally long and bumpy driveway.

All I could see - which wasn't much - was road, trees, and the occasional chubby raccoon sitting on the forest floor, prowling for whatever food they could get their hands on. Sometimes I'd see a faint outline further into the woods, stock still. I paid no mind - it was probably just a deer.

It wasn't - but, well, I didn't know that.

I drove on.

After a while, a log cabin came into view, smoke drifting lazily from the chimney. I recognized it instantly as Derek's. The lights were on, but nobody seemed to be home. But his Jeep was parked in the driveway too, so he had to be here somewhere.

I parked the car, before opening the door and sliding feet first onto the late autumn leaves, which crunched under my sneakers. I wanted to move my bags inside (and hopefully get some dinner too), but I thought it'd be best to at least say hi to Derek first instead of just barging in. I pulled the hood up on my jacket and walked to the cabin.

The door was unlocked, and creaked as I opened it. The TV was off, and the gun which he normally kept over the mantel was missing.

This would strike most people as odd, but I know Derek, and he absolutely loved to hunt late at night. Sure, it was pretty dumb - he never used a stand, either, so he had bears and pumas to contend with - but he was reckless like that.

So, naturally, I figured that he was in the woods, shooting at any animal he happened to see. I grabbed my own gun, a flashlight, and a visibility vest to keep from getting shot myself, and started down the hunting trail he always used. Normally, the woods would be filled with noise

after nightfall - crickets, cicadas, and pretty much anything that was awake at the time. But the cold had come kinda early that year, so things were quiet. I heard the trees in the wind and my own breath. It was peaceful, if a little eerie.

The trail was about as bright and sunny as the bottom of the ocean (even with the flashlight), and more than once or twice, I tripped over a root that seemed to be all but invisible.

After around ten minutes or so, I started to hear it. A voice. No matter how far I walked, it didn't grow louder or softer. I couldn't hear it too well, but something about it unnerved me.

Then the pitch changed, and my heart sank into my gut.

It was Derek. He was screaming.

I broke into a sprint, arms pumping and feet stumbling over themselves. I did my best to call out mid-stride. "I'm coming! Hold on!" What if a bear had gotten to him?

I eventually made it into a small clearing. I heard his screaming get louder, more frantic. "Jackson! Jackson, help me!"

I turned, more than a little disoriented. Where was he? I walked unsteadily towards the treeline.

There are certain times in a person's life when they know exactly what they have to do, even if it doesn't seem to make any sense in the slightest. Bit by bit, I tilted my head up, staring into the trees. I aimed my flashlight - and drew in a sharp gasp.

Sitting in the bare branches above me was a mass of mangled, disjointed fleshy limbs, like a spider with skin. The legs - or arms - of the thing ended in long, pale hands, wrapped almost gently around surrounding boughs, holding it aloft. Its numerous eyes were a pure milky white, and blood dripped red from its toothy, buglike mouth, landing with soft splats on the dead leaves below.

I froze, a deer in headlights. I wasn't sure if the thing could actually see me or not. I wondered if it was blind - and a sudden rustle from behind it confirmed this. Its head snapped around, facing the source of the noise - an unlucky deer, no doubt. It faced me again for a moment - then turned and clambered away.

Now, as I watched whatever this was, I had been slowly and cautiously backing away, like you do when you see a snake. As soon as I saw it disappear entirely, I dropped my gun (a pretty dumb idea, but it's kind of hard to think in those circumstances) and made a mad dash back to the cabin and my car.

I ran with reckless abandon, stumbling into trees and over roots, my jacket catching on branches - or were they arms? Only one thing was on my mind - getting out of there as fast as

possible. Every twig that snapped or leaf that rustled in the wind sent chills up my spine, filling me with blind, inescapable panic.

Every step I took, I had the unshakable feeling that the thing was behind me. And when I saw the lights of the cabin, I ran faster, grabbing my keys from my pocket with shaking hands and unlocking the car with a small honk. I flung the door open, got in, and immediately locked all the doors (and the trunk too, just in case). I turned on the car and sat there for a moment. That wasn't real. It couldn't be. I had to have been seeing things.

Then the thing slammed down on top of Derek's Jeep, letting out a raging scream. I might've screamed a little as well as I peeled out of there, foot pushing the gas pedal nearly to the floor.

I didn't let myself relax until I reached the highway, already on my way to the police station.

They found him eventually, lying at the bottom of a ravine.

His voice box was missing.

## “I See Fire”

My dreams have always frightened me. Even if they weren't nightmares, they had something... off, about them. Faces were uncanny, surroundings too clear compared to the foreground, objects warping and changing in my hands as I tried my best to hang on to them, only for them to slip through my fingers. They say that you can't just make up a face – that every face in your dreams, you saw somewhere. I wonder where I saw them first.

My dad was always more than willing to comfort me after nightmares – read one of the thousand books that I had shoved under my bed out of a fear of monsters. They can't hide where they can't fit. At least, that was the logic my nine-year-old self eagerly accepted. I was still terrified of the closet, though.

But the dreams were the worst. The weird thing was, I never watched scary movies, or read ghost stories, or any stuff like that. I was the stereotypical girl – I was never as social, but I wore skirts and headbands and kept a little purple diary with a lock. I still wear hairclips with big stars on them. I watched documentaries, but I basically grew up in the town museum, so that was to be expected. Nothing that matched up with how dark my dreams were.

Sometimes it was places I recognized, sometimes it wasn't. Fields and mansions and lighthouses and sand dunes in the summertime. I could walk around, and look at things – melting aside, I could even judge the weight of the objects I touched. There weren't ever that many people. Even in a crowd, only a few would be able to move and speak – their voices sounded tinny, like on an old-fashioned radio.

And every time, the person would be dead.

Sometimes they didn't have that many injuries at all. They'd be a little pale, a little distant – if they didn't move so stiffly, you'd think they were normal. Sometimes they'd turn around and be a grotesque mess. A couple of times, I woke up nauseous because of how they looked. They'd always give me a message. Always. Sometimes, they even made repeat visits.

I kept good track of them – my diary filled up a while ago, but I still have it, and wear the key around my neck. I took the diary with me when I stayed at my friend's house that night, which turned out to be one of the smartest decisions I've made.

I arrived home to ashes, and our town's one ambulance. They told me he was dead on arrival.

It's been a couple days. My cousin's flying in from out of town for the funeral. My aunt and uncle – we were never that close with them anyway. No hard feelings, just... distance.

I think my next dream might be of flames.

At least I'll get to say goodbye.

“Lovely”

The last time I felt beautiful, before, was when I was twenty years old. That was when that mugger cornered me in the alley, armed with the horrible attitude of a desperate man and a bottle of what the police later told me was homemade acid. He got all of twenty-five dollars, but I lost so much more than that - my left pinky, although my face suffered the brunt of it.

I got a prosthetic pinky, but - well, my face was harder to fix. And even when it was fixed, after a haze of surgeries, consultations, and more surgeries - it still didn't look *right*. It looked like - I was some horrible photocopy, slightly to the left of my own self.

I lived like this for a year or two. I suppose - I don't know if anyone would want to hear about it. I withdrew from everyone. It was partially their doing, of course. Sideways glances, quiet whispered conversations about how I had changed. I guess they thought the acid had wrecked my ears, too. And eventually, I took the hint. I stopped going.

And I was alone. And I told myself that it was okay. It was okay I worked from home, and had everything delivered, and threw out all the mirrors in my home. It was okay that I wore sunglasses over my mask so no one would even see my eyes. The sunglasses were prescription, too - I wouldn't trust contacts touching my eyes, much less anything else.

It was... a few months ago I first met them. I'm a clothes designer - not for any big brands, but smaller businesses will buy my designs for clothes and make them. My designs are more alternative - all ruffles and odd patterns, but people seem to love them. One of the only things I leave my new house for is to sit in a field that connects to my backyard. It's quiet there - no one to bother me, and I get all my best ideas there. It's like standing in the shower, without all the cold water.

That's when I first saw it - glowing a soft green, flittering in the grass. It was small - not a luna moth, certainly. Small and soft-looking and oh so delicate. I had kneeled down next to it. For a few minutes, there was nothing except the moth and me. It was a fairy, an angel, a perfection in winged form. I could have stayed there forever, simply staring.

I remember I didn't feel scared when it fluttered to my face. It just - felt right. Felt for the first time in a long, long time - like I was meant to be there. So I didn't flinch, didn't spit, didn't splutter as it crawled into my mouth and down my throat.

And it told me to breathe. And I did.

I felt... warmer, somehow. Lighter. Better.

I walked home, and I felt like I was floating.

I didn't dream, when I slept that night... I don't remember dreaming at all, after that. But I slept plenty. I slept all the time. I started setting more alarms, and... I'd sleep right through them. I missed calls. That was okay. My clients had flexible deadlines as was. They didn't mind. So I slept more, and ate less, and got much, much thinner. I remember being alarmed, by this. I ended up getting protein supplements to help.

The doctors couldn't have been that worried for me. I was too ugly for that. But between you and me, I think they'd be scared of me now, too. I'm too pretty. They made me pretty. I'm warm, and light, and *beautiful*.

All stringy now, but beautiful. Fluttery, but beautiful.

I am lovely.

And they live in me. That's what we all are. Warm, soft, wheezing homes for them. They love so softly.

And they'll make you lovely too.

Breathe deep.

## “Burned Out”

It's two-thirty in the morning. I can't sleep. Somehow, I know I'll only fall asleep about five minutes before my alarm clock starts beeping indignantly at me to wake up. Again.

I can't do this.

It's only Tuesday, and I'm already tired of being here again. I can't even sleep, I'm so restless.

...maybe I could call Angela? No, she'd just tell me to go back to bed. She thinks she knows what's best for me. She probably does. Not that I'd have any idea.

I'm half tempted to just pack up, drop my key on the checkout desk and leave. Maybe I need to drive. I want to go drive. I'll need coffee. Do they have coffee this early?

It's still warm here, though. I want to sleep.

I can't sleep.

...it's cold. Did they shut off the heating?

I swing my legs out of bed and stand up. The carpet might as well be sandpaper. I don't want to think about what might've happened here.

I'll ask her later. One of her friends is into that true crime stuff. Quinton, I think?

Quincy. Yeah, that's it.

Ow. Must've slept on my arm wrong again. Wonder if it even healed right. Damn. Gotta focus.

...I'll just change my shirt, I think. Not like there's anyone around to even notice.

I still gotta get something nice to wear for the funeral. I'm sure there'll be enough towns between there and here to find a dress shirt, at least. Maybe a thrift shop?

Wonder how Maggie's doing. Not well, obviously, but – besides that. Stuff like that can't be good for you.

Grief can't be good for you. Or those – delusions Vicky mentioned. If I lost someone close, I'd be seeing ghosts everywhere too.

I... really still don't get it. About two things.

One, the death itself. I mean, I know it was a fire – if only because Vicky told me to keep my lighter put away while I'm there. Something about it setting Maggie off – apparently poor kid can't have as much as a candle around anymore. And it's a small town, and – well, long story short, they're both staying at Vicky's apartment now. So – must've just obliterated the house completely.

Two – why me?

I mean, Uncle Mike was pretty outgoing – he wasn't super close with us at all (thanks, mom) – but he had plenty of friends in town, I think. And I haven't visited in years. I don't get it. I'm certainly not a candidate to be in most people's wills.

...I gotta stop thinking so much. Or start thinking more. I'm not sure yet.

It's drop-dead gorgeous outside. Full moon and more stars than you'd see in any big city. Looks like it might even snow later – the clouds have that muted tint to them, y'know?

I'd live outside if I could. I hate the cold, but – I would. It's too pretty not to. That's probably why the room is so cold.

Stuff's packed now. Technically checkout isn't until eleven, but hey, I already paid for my stay so it's not like they can get too mad about it. I didn't trash the room or anything either. Didn't even forget my jacket this time, either – I am not doing a repeat of what happened in Atlanta.

Brr. I should probably get a new hat, too.



Ah, there she is. Not Angela – I mean my truck. Maybe I should name her. Do people even name their rides anymore? What would I even name her? Maybe something a little rough around the edges. And I still gotta buff the scratch in the fender from Utah. Way too much sand and rocks. And apparently someone in an honest to heaven Volkswagen bus. Anyway.

Hm. I don't know. Layla, maybe? That'd work.

Layla the pickup.

...nah, that'd be weird. I won't name it. It'd probably be rude anyway. It's still pretty though. I may not take the best care of myself, but my truck is probably the best investment I've ever made.

I mean, that's not saying much, though.

Late night driving is the best kind of driving to me, at least.

I'm really not one for romance, but I'd say it's romantic. The stars, the quiet, and whatever music is on the radio. The best radio shows are on late, too. It feels like you're one of the last people on the whole planet.

On the road now. There's almost no lights. I've been on country roads darker than any shady alleyway could hope to be. Not that that's a bad thing, but there's also no deer to worry about hitting in the cities.

First rest stop I find, I'm getting some coffee.

I'm so tired.

The road looks like it might go on and on for forever. I love it.

It's more home than a house, anyway.

