

Darkness Lay Ahead

It was decided. The day would come when she would leave her prison-like home and lead a life of her own. Without worrying about the expectations of anyone but herself, she would shed her old skin and fashion a new life from the ruins of her old one. She wasn't sure exactly when that day would come or when she would have the courage to take that life-altering step, but she knew in her heart that it would happen. How and when were not important.

She was not rich or poor. She was not stunning or ugly, neither brilliant nor stupid. She was just a regular girl; a girl with a lot of ambition and an overwhelming sense of hope. But day after day that hope began fading away. She walked, talked, worked, went through her daily routine with her hope chipping off with every step. She didn't notice it at first; however it hit her once on her way back from work that the only thing keeping her alive was slowly disappearing right before her eyes. It might seem trivial to some, but to her it meant more than could be put into words.

She hoped for independence. To follow her own rules and not do what was expected of her from her family and society as a whole. Her family was kind and loving, but they had never understood her. Their values and norms had become suffocating. Their practicality was her death. Issues that were natural for them were intolerable for her. For five years they had been living in debt; a debt that compelled them to sell their most valued and most valuable belongings. It forced her to pursue a job she was not interested in, rather than a career she would be passionate about. And it still wasn't enough. As the crushing interest overweighed the debt itself, they were caught in an endless whirlpool that continuously sucked their income. Quickly her dreams and desires became irrelevant. Once the monthly bank notice arrived in the mail, any step

she tried to take towards bettering her future was wiped away like a wave erasing wet footprints in the sand.

As she walked through the streets and watched the people going about their lives she grew irritated. And when she thought about the social structure she was obliged to be a part of, she felt nauseated. In a culture of supposed to and not supposed to, she screamed 'I want'. But her screams were not heard and her wishes, along with others', were overlooked. Thus, no one could understand why she regularly cried at night alone in her room. No one could believe that her situation occasionally lead to nervous breakdowns. No one saw it or really saw her. Therefore the more she struggled, the more she was confined to this entrapment.

Many alleged they knew what's best for her better than she did. From where they claimed that arrogant right, she didn't understand. It was as if her future, much like her past and her present, was predetermined by fate or by others. And she was nothing more than a tool that would move the process along, without having any say in the matter. She was constantly talked down to, as if she had little intellect and virtually no comprehension of her own life; like a child. Even when she was given advice out of good intention, she rejected it. Not because she's above it, but because she could no longer tolerate being told what others believe was in her best interest. She fought for what she believed and struggled to break free from the eyes and minds of those surrounding her, while living among them. But all her attempts always ended in failure.

Failure was a constant in her life. A shadow cast over her; moving along with every step she took. It nailed itself deep into her soul, haunting and intimidating her. With it came self-loathing and huge waves of depression. It occasionally hindered her ability to interact with people and perform tasks at work, however that was rare. For the most part work and socializing were distractions, a way of momentarily forgetting the endless hole created by her depreciating mood and desperate situation. While she would not be considered a failure in the traditional

sense, the fear of it alone was enough to put her in a melancholy state. The fear of failure hung over head wherever she went making taking any decision an impossible endeavor. She would have to think and rethink ten steps ahead, which ultimately exhausted her and resulted in her indecisiveness. Thus her shackles remained intact, weighing her down and forcing her to submit. But it was really her duty towards her family and the judging eyes of society that put her in place.

She defiantly accepted her situation, always believing it was temporary. In the mean time she distanced herself as much as possible. Sealed herself behind an iron fort of her own creation, letting very few near it and no one surpass it. She watched the world from behind her impenetrable gates and wished for a way to unlock them. Therefore her presence was felt by nearly no one. While she was technically alive, she never existed. She was vapor; evaporating through the walls of every room she entered, and creeping out from under any door without anyone realizing or even noticing. She wondered occasionally if she had ever really been alive, if her pseudo-existence meant anything to anyone but herself.

The distance she kept forced her to live in an atmosphere of distrust. She tread lightly around those she interacted with, in fear of making mistakes or getting too close. Thinking a hundred times before uttering a single phrase, because she knew that words cannot be unsaid and regret was far worse than remaining silent. The dread of revealing more than she had allowed herself was overwhelming. Even though there were a few she considered trustworthy, there was still no one she trusted as much as herself. She relied on her instincts to guide her. A concept most fitting for animals, infants and the ignorant; those with a lower mental capacity that cannot withstand rational thinking; however she found it to be a strong foundation. Rationality and logic, while necessary for complex decisions, could be manipulated. They were dry and lack emotion. Emotions on the other hand were too fluid and could easily be misleading. But instincts

were intuitive; they were basic to the point that they were occasionally inexplicable. That feeling in someone's gut telling them that something wasn't right was more powerful than a well-rounded argument to the contrary. And that undeniable force was enough to drive her towards what was beyond her reach; it provided her with strength to venture without needing to trust another soul. Therefore she concealed her true self and shut out the world in hopes of one day starting over and being able to face it. A fraud was what she was and what she chose to be for the majority of the time. She lived in a perfectly crafted fable, so intricately woven that it wouldn't allow anything in or out. Nonetheless, however untrue her exterior may be she had power within.

On various scattered occasions she would open-up to a friend or two. Anxious about their reactions she was cautious of what to say and how it would be said. She maintained her image quite eloquently that imagining the extent of what lies beneath the surface was impossible. She was considered easy to read; a bold, straight-forward, outspoken person with nothing to hide. But her true complexity was only understood by those who never claimed to know her. Nonetheless no matter what people's perceptions were the play continued. Reciting her lines and meticulously adjusting her wardrobe, she put on a show every day for everyone to see. Only in the safety of her own solitude did she remove all her masks, let down her hair and see her real face in the mirror; a face too fragile to expose. She was a mysterious combination of extreme inner strength veiled with a delicate membrane hidden behind thick concrete.

Away from her immediate surroundings while still within them, she lived in a self-created world which stretched as far as her mind's borders could reach. Her imagination was fertile and her mind had no boundaries, so her internal travels knew no limits. She withdrew her consciousness from her present reality to lose herself in her thoughts. And spent an inordinate amount of time in extended dialogues with herself, trying to make as much sense as possible of a situation, an incident or her next step. That happened anywhere and under any circumstances. It

was her way of filling her boredom or fleeing. It wasn't until she returned to her normal state that she realized how much she couldn't bare the life she led.

Her inability to accept or even tolerate her life stemmed from the feeling of being an outsider. A strong feeling of not belonging that forced her into exile. She was thus a lonely person, even when she was among those she cared for the most; she was surrounded by everyone, but with no one. Her loneliness acted as both a companion and a prison-warden. It provided her with an ambiguous type of friendship and no way out. It was an all-consuming force that suffocated as well as protected her. It was only when she was truly alone, that she didn't feel very lonely. That usually happened in sleep.

She eventually found herself sleeping for extended periods of time. While there was no real reason behind her exhaustion, she still found great comfort in her bed. Her eyelids would eventually grow heavy and even though she may be mentally awake, her eyes would refuse to remain open. Sleep provided her with solace; a peace she couldn't find elsewhere and an escape from the reality she despised. Under the covers, sheltered by the dark of the night and the quiet of her room, was where she could be herself. It was unnerving having to live a lie; conforming to strict values that were not her own. She was cautious of every word she said and every move she made, hoping that her fraudulence would not be discovered. But surrounded by the night she was free. The darkness had always been her friend. It welcomed her and accepted her. It was an outlet where her dreams could develop. So she waited fervently for the night to come, knowing that that was when her day truly began. In a world of endless dreams, she wasted away; certain that wouldn't and couldn't last.

An introvert at heart, she wished to live away from people. In a solitary and peaceful environment surrounded by nature and devoid from the materialistic existence that smothered her. In a world where one was worth more than what they own and what they earn, she would be relieved of much stress and anxiety. She hoped for a day when numbers no longer governed her life, when creditors wouldn't knock on her door and when she didn't have to feel responsible for a debt she didn't owe. Proof of that debt arrived in a small envelope on the first day of each month, without delay. She stared at the white envelope with the clear plastic window for an immeasurable amount of time. Until it finally struck her, this was an opportune moment and she was going to take advantage of it.

The next morning was no different than any other; however after an uneventful work day she resigned and collected all documents. Her boss was shocked by the abruptness of her request. She had never expressed any kind of displeasure regarding her job; on the contrary she was a dedicated employee with an immaculate record. The explanation she gave was precise though; she was moving and was given little notice herself. Scattered clouds between deep oranges infused with dark purples, marked the faded disappearance of the day and the initiation of her plan. With her belongings, savings and an adequate amount of food packed in preparation for her journey, she bid her childhood home farewell and left.

She rode the metro until the end of the line. It dropped her off at an obscure remote neighborhood, where old abandoned houses hidden behind untamed plants stood next to low unfinished homes. Its unusual appearance gave a foreign guest, like herself, the misperception that it was part of the nearby forest. The area seemed forgotten and its few inhabitants were indifferent about its depreciating state. Her sudden presence was startling; it was odd and almost unheard for an inner city resident to be found in such a location. She noticeably stood out as curious eyes followed her every step. It was unsettling.

Nonetheless she was directed to a tiny inn located at the point which officially marked the end of the city, only a few meters away from the forest. It separated the enclosed man-made structure from the wilderness and was primarily used by weary travelers recovering from long trips of the road. She rented a room overlooking the thousands of acres of tight-knit trees, growing high as one unit into the night sky. The sheer size of it from such proximity was frightful. It was difficult to imagine based on pictures on a computer screen. There were several locations beyond the forest, none familiar to her. Yet her plan was still simple, she would walk through the forest until the trees stopped and the streets started and that would be her new home. It was not the most thought-out plan, nor was it the most reliable, but it was enough for her to go by. She chose this peculiar route because it was untraceable. There was no electronic record or digital proof of any kind that she left. The method made her feel like a fugitive, but it was the only guarantee of a clean beginning wherever she would end-up.

Putting her fears aside she hoped that the next day would bring her more clarity. After having a heavy meal, the inn keeper explained to her how to navigate through the forest. He was astounded at first by her question, because she didn't look like a person who had spent much time outdoors. But he helped her without judgment either way. He showed her a path, which cut across the side of the road and extended into woods, and instructed her to follow it without a single detour so she wouldn't get lost. He also provided her with a map and plenty of water, but warned her that it would be a long and strenuous walk that would take a couple of days. She assured him that she didn't mind the length, whether in time or in distance. He wished her luck on her way out, still not understanding why a young woman like her would take on such a deranged quest. After hundreds of meters of tiresome walking and intermittent breaks she made it to the path. Being enveloped by nature for the first time was invigorating; her pace increased with every step.

Before long she was running through the forest, alone, with nothing but her backpack. The backpack contained her life: the past, the present, the future all squeezed into one bag. The path grew narrower as the trees grew thicker. But she continued to run faster and faster until her legs could barely support her any longer. Why was she running? She didn't know. There was no one chasing her, no one threatening her, yet she felt the need to escape. Her heart beat quickly; she breathed unevenly. She put her family and her friends behind her to embark on an insane, unpredictable journey to the unknown.

As the darkness began to scare her and exhaustion took hold of her, she decided to rest her fatigued body and start again when the sun was up. She lied on a soft patch of grass covered with crisp brown leaves and used her bag beneath her head as pillow. Curling her body into the fetal position, she tried to sleep. Ominous noises echoing across the forest made her task nearly impossible. Every time she tried to relax and allow herself to sleep, the distant sound of a hooting owl or the howl of a wolf would startle her. The grass below her was soft and comforting, the soft winds were cooling, but the fear overcame her senses. She couldn't rest so long as it was inside of her. It was fear that forced her to run. She didn't know which was more frightful, though, the forest, her former life or her indefinite future?

All she knew was this: she would be dead if she hadn't left. Not dead in the literal sense, but figuratively speaking that was the path she was moving towards. As dangerous as her choice was, it was exciting and essential. She couldn't bear her life any longer; the monotony along with the extreme waves of change. It was enough. Enough to command her departure from the city she was born and raised in, and take control of her own life however frightening that may be. Thus the day she decided to leave, was when she learned she was destined to cross the woods and see for herself what was on the other side.

The night crawled with unfriendly creatures; killer beasts and venomous beings. Where they hid or if they even existed where she slept? She had no idea. She prayed for the night to end quickly and safely. The sound of her heart in her ear felt like a ticking clock, every beat bringing her closer to sunrise. To say she slept that night would have been a lie. At dawn she was wide awake, anxious and enthusiastic about the start of a new day. She walked slowly, trying desperately to let go of her fear. The terror residing in the night before was forgotten when the tender morning sunrays hit her face. With every passing day, she grew more accustomed to her surroundings; almost feeling at home among the wild plants and lurking animals. Proud of her limited survival skills and new found independence, she sustained herself in this unfriendly environment. She carefully navigated through the trees at a steady pace, wondering how long her journey would last. By the fourth day her wandering came to a stop, and she finally caught a glimpse of what lie beyond the once mysterious forest.