

It was the worst of dreams that pulled me from my sleep entirely unaware of my identity or location. I lay completely bare in a bed of trim grass, damp with morning dew, and shrouded in a darkness that the rising sun had only just begun to fight away. Turning my head to the right, I saw standing before me the statue of an enormous woman painting pride and glory against the brightening horizon. At her feet a pair of broken shackles told a story of newfound liberty and in an upraised arm she held a torch of inanimate fire; a guide for the lost, salvation for the broken. To my left the open field broke into a thick forest of redwoods that reached up and tickled the fading stars, and through the density of their elongated trunks I spotted a peculiar white glow dancing enticingly among them. Spotting no signs of familiarity, I leapt to my feet in a panic, slipping wildly on the slick grass beneath me and landing back on the ground with a painful thud before scrambling to my feet once more. My surroundings suddenly seemed terribly frightening. The steel matron towered even higher above me inspiring a vision of her springing to life and setting the grass at my feet ablaze, and all at once I felt an extreme sense of vulnerability, standing there in the field; I spun around, finding no solace or shelter, and knew that my only option was to flee into the woods. It was then, with no sense of direction and no knowledge of what awaited me at the source of that ethereal glow, that I lunged towards the tree line and broke into the thick of wooden giants before me.

As I struggled over fallen trees and fumbled through low strung branches it dawned on me that the forest may not have been my safest bet. It seemed as though every gnarled root sought to trip me, every loosened pebble to send me careening down

some perilous slope. It was only a few minutes before my naked form was entirely covered in scrapes and bruises; some areas were rubbed completely raw, and caked with blood and dirt. My demise came when another like me, another human, an oddly familiar stranger who wore a knowing smile and malicious eyes took chase, teasing me all the while.

“I know all of the bad things you’ve done.” he said, savagely stalking me, sometimes on all four limbs, “Let me show you who you are.”

His words sent chills down my spine that worked their way into my aching lungs and fueled the flames that burned my thighs as I sprinted harder through unyielding foliage. I was approaching a large incline when I began to feel it again: the overwhelming sense of vulnerability that spurred my flight into the woods had worked its way into an open wound and wound its way through my body, a crippling poison that pulled me to my knees once and for all.

My pursuer never arrived after that. I felt no other presence in my proximity at all, and it was like no one had been chasing me, as if I’d imagined the entire thing. I cursed my mind for its treason and remained curled up on the forest floor, watching through tear soaked eyes as a solitary ant scurried frantically around blades of grass and over fallen twigs, and wondering if the giant might have been kinder to me. If she had come to life after all, perhaps instead of engulfing the field in flames, she would have reached down with an enormous metal hand and lifted me to her bosom, somehow providing a warmth comparable to that of the human touch with her metallic caress. Perhaps she would have comforted me like a child not yet ready to give up the tit.

As I continued to dwell on this, a decision it was too late to make, the ant continued his frenzied escape from the place where I'd fallen, and it occurred to me that I may have landed on his colony, crushing his entire family beneath the weight of my body and effectively leaving him the sole survivor of an entire civilization. He eventually came upon another ant, however, and together they continued to another, and then another until finally I knew that the ant would be just fine. He, at least, had some companions in this world.

Time continued to pass, the sun continued to rise, and I continued to lie there, defeated and alone. My unfocused eyes kept crying as the reddish browns of towering trunks were brightened by the sunrise, and the canopy soon transformed into a myriad of green bulbs that painted the forest floor in a magnificent blend of shadow and soft, emerald light. As the sun arched higher into the morning sky, the air began to grow warmer, eventually causing beads of sweat to form on my skin and roll into my various sores, stinging me back to life. I rose to my feet with a growing sense of ambition, a sudden desire to find myself under better circumstances, to find myself at all, and faced an expansive hillside that made me feel terribly small. I did not know that while I took the first tentative steps of my great ascent, the source of the mysterious glow from earlier danced carelessly at the top, waiting for me to arrive.

My first few steps up the grand incline were extremely cautious and incited a cacophony of gasps and hisses as every movement created fresh cracks in the dried abrasions of prior fumbings. I continued slowly through the woods for a while, taking care not to fall as the hillside grew ever steeper, insistently berating myself in mind to

gather my esteem and hasten my pace. Eventually, doing just that, I found a humbling humor in the discovery that navigating the perilous forest floor was much easier than it initially seemed. I began to over step protruding roots with a graceful finesse, and when slipping on loosened stones I was able to regain my footing almost without effort. These minor achievements sparked within me a surge of confidence that sent me into a cautious trot, and I found myself thinking that, had I been in less of a panic, I might have progressed with this much ease from the beginning.

More time passed as I continued my jog, and as I scaled the hill, the sun, now behind me, scaled the true blue sky, beating down on my shoulders as I pulled them back and continued my journey with even more confidence. I was repeatedly met with disappointment as time after time I fell under the illusion that I was nearing the top of the hill only to crest the nearest peak and find another waiting for me on the other side. I persevered, nonetheless, even as my legs and feet wept for mercy, and eventually I did reach my destination, sinking to my knees in relief as I watched the sun, whose light had also just breached the peak, chase away the hillside's looming shadow and illuminate the view of a magnificent bay in the distance. It was there, standing atop my conquered mountain and beholding all that awaited me moving forward, that I felt yet another presence behind me. Turning to see who had joined me, surprisingly without fear that it was the frightening beast from my past, I found at once that I'd lost my breath, and at some point my heart had forgotten how to beat as it fell hopelessly in love faster than I'd ever thought possible.

The sunlight bounced magnificently from his bronzed skin, and a toned physique was detailed by the small shadows it cast upon itself. My eyes trailed upwards to a thick of mahogany hair that called for me to comb my fingers through its silken strands, and as my new companion began to circle me, for in my admiration I'd begun to circle him, I became bewitched by the way his rich brown eyes flashed amber when the morning sun glanced off of them just so. Of all of his features, however, none was as marvelous as his smile. The true beauty, the source of that alluring white glow I'd spotted before beginning my quest, lay among two rows of immaculate teeth; between lips that could only have been as soft as the precious pink petals whose complexion they so closely resembled. Continuing to admire the flawless being before me, I uttered three enamored syllables:

“Sunrisa!”

...and to my great pleasure his smile grew a fraction wider, inspiring my own lips to stretch into a grin. Just as quickly as his smile had grown, however, it vanished from his face entirely and he regarded me with a sympathetic scrutiny.

“I know all that you've done.” he said, “Let me show you who you are.”

I felt my smile falter as well, and stumbled backwards a few paces. Unlike the man before him, however, this one was determined not to let me escape. He grabbed my arm before I could retreat any further and looked at me with hypnotic brown eyes.

“There is no need to fear what I have to show you,” he consoled, “so long as you understand that who you were, and who you are do not dictate who you will become.”

I halted my half-hearted attempts at pulling away and faced him with a furrowed brow, eyes searching for a long lost ability to trust. I felt my stomach do somersaults at our shrunken proximity, and, sensing my growing infatuation, he released my arm, taking a step backward as my heart fell to my groin.

“I’m not here to be that person for you.” He hung his head slightly, eyes averted to the ground, and though I wanted desperately to contest, I knew that without consent there could be no love.

“Then why are you here?” I spoke at last, and without responding he took my hand once more.

At once his face was gone from my vision, as was the hillside, the redwoods, and Lady Liberty who, from the top of the hill, I could see standing off in the direction from which I’d arrived. In their place was a rapid succession of images, some of which were filled with joy and love, but others that equaled those pleasures with pain and sorrow, and I realized that my new friend was showing me my past, reuniting me with my identity. Many of the memories that flashed before my eyes sent blades of pain through my veins, threatening to make me crumble yet again, but I remained vigilant, soon discovering what there was to gain from this bittersweet experience. I was developing a new understanding. I felt myself stand straighter as the weight of a million grudges against myself and others were progressively lifted from my shoulders, and though I was not sad nor in pain, I also felt a stream of warm tears begin to pour from my eyes. When the enlightenment was finally complete my vision returned and I swayed slightly in place. I hadn’t noticed, but at some point my companion had let go of my hand and,

according to him, I'd managed to stand on my own two feet for most of the process. The sun at this point was just reaching the peak of its arch and the world glowed gloriously around us as I took it all in through newly experienced eyes. Just like the ant in the woods below, I'd found a companion at last, and though I remained deeply infatuated with him, I no longer relied on his reciprocation of those feelings. I regarded my friend one last time, delighting in the sight of his charming smile and matching it with my own as we locked hands once more. Together, we began our great descent into the cool waters of the San Francisco Bay.