

Smoke Follows Beauty

You think about the body pillow and old Halloween wig that sleeps under your covers tonight, and you know that ruse will keep your parents from noticing you aren't really there. It's so cliché, but it works. You climb out of your parents' house towards the woods as the night drifts closer to the earth, cloaking any semblance of clarity. You zip up your crimson hoodie with full awareness of the irony of walking into the woods against your parents' permission at night while wearing red, but you aren't her.

Still, you shrug off the crisp November air and keep walking. There are no big, bad wolves in these woods, anyway. You walk along the paths you know by heart, only the darkened thoroughfares cast shaky shadows that slowly pull wisps of doubt inside you. The creaking and cracking of branches against branches with the final chirpings of the Indian summer crickets send the shivers up and down, not your spine, but deeper than that. Your mind sees the crickets rubbing their scraper and file wings against each other in haunting violin bows scrapping against strings.

The moon comes and goes through the trees and clouds, distorting the path as you go further and further. You must be getting close, you hope. You trip over a root that a rickety shadow concealed in its fight with the moonlight, your hood falling from your head, but you don't completely lose your footing. You are grateful and take the breath almost lost in the almost fall.

The smell of bonfire comes with the intake of air, and your waning confidence boomerangs back with force. As if your parents know these woods at all like you do. You follow the smoke to its owner, a small but sure, thigh-high flame, enough for warmth but not enough for damage or unwanted attention. A short fallen log sits alone by the fire. You question if he tired

of waiting for you, but an arm slithers around your waist from behind you as his voice slides in your ear: I wondered when you would get here.

You feel off-kilter, your breath feeling like a wild creature dying to get out of and yet stay in its cage at the same time. You crave the feeling and lean your head to the left as he scrapes his scruff against your neck, unyielding in his squeeze around your waist.

You expect him to ask you about how hard it was to get away from your parents—you want him to share in your triumph over them and their rules—but he doesn't ask. He only holds on. So you hold on to his arms around you. The fire cracks and pops, and the smoke follows the wind change towards you.

Smoke follows beauty, you know, he whispers in your ear before nipping at your neck. An owl hoots long, low tones you've never heard before, and your skin changes from goose bumps to feeling as though it is scorching through your t-shirt and hoodie. You grab at the zipper, longing for the cool autumn air on your skin, but he's holding you too close. You gasp and push against his arms until he frees you. You turn and look at him, but his normally ice-blue eyes only reflect the fire burning behind you. The smoke drifts between you and him. You cannot breathe without tasting smoke, so you run. You run back through the woods without floundering once, the moon and your memory making you sure-footed as you race away from the heat of the November woods and him calling your name.