

Here the World is Quiet

The man was still caught in the rose bushes.

Mari watched from the windows of what had once been the library lobby, the view of the gardens distorted from smears of dirt and blood on the glass. The figure in the distance slumped forward in a web of barbed branches, spread-eagled—a crucified ragdoll.

As she watched, the man jerked with a renewed spasm of strength.

Mari had spent a sleepless night thinking about the man, alone in the dark, with the many teeth of his prison sinking deeper into his body. Although she avoided windows at night, guilt propelled her to turn on the emergency flashlight, which flickered with dying battery life, and squint into the complete darkness. In the early hours of the morning, she ran to the window to see if the man was still there.

She was lying to herself—none of the other ones had been able to extricate their bodies from the thorns. Mari hated herself for hesitating, for clinging to the safety of the library.

The man in the rose bushes threw his head back and gaped at the sky, mouth opening and closing mutely. He collapsed backwards, heavily, into the thorns.

He would stay there until he died, like the other one.

The others were out already. They wandered like spectres in the gray dawn and tripped over the grass-covered sidewalks and parking lot. None of them made any move to help the struggling man.

Ryan, the maintenance guy, swayed by the side of the building. A man stared at a tree, open robe flapping over the shrunken skin folds of his stomach. And there on the steps, head on her knees, crouched the old woman she had cut from the bushes only a week ago.

Those who got caught avoided the bushes afterwards, an observation Mari found vaguely hopeful: it suggested that the Senseless, if nothing else, had the ability to learn.

Her footsteps sounded too loud in the emptiness of the library. She opened the door a crack and peered outside. An eye stared back at her, bloodshot and unblinking.

“Excuse me, Janice,” Mari said, gently pushing the woman out of the way.

Janice put both of her hands on the library doors like she was being frisked. She turned her head sideways to watch her, with only a shadow of the former intensity she had when she interviewed Mari two years before.

Mari was uneasy about the unlocked door. The entrance doors were heavy and the pull motion seemed beyond their comprehension. Leaving the door locked meant she would struggle with getting back in, and those extra seconds were crucial if something were to come after her.

And Sam, who was different, who had somehow stayed hidden in the library for hours without her knowing, was out there somewhere.

The gash on her forehead sent threads of pain through her body as she walked down the steps. Around her head were makeshift bandages torn from a discarded shirt and disinfected with the contents of an expired bottle of hydrogen peroxide. The same strips of cloth were wound around both of her hands.

At the bottom of the steps, Mari looked around. She felt, as she often did, like she was floating underwater. The Senseless drifted slowly past her, pausing to gaze at a rock, a tree, a passing bird. Some eyes tracked her, but nothing else did.

“Weeds are nature’s way of reminding us who’s really in charge,” Janice had told her once, in her customary wide-brimmed hat and dirty jeans. Under her management, the garden

grew spectacularly bright roses in aligned rows throughout the rectangular lawn. Now the rows of bushes entwined into a furious tangle of blooms, vines, and thorned branches like spiked clubs.

Mari waded shoulder-high through the brambles, cutting a passage through an overgrown path with her office scissors, last used to repair worn book covers. Thorns, bright orange and red, some several inches long, snagged her jeans and long-sleeved shirt, and pulled her hair.

The ensnared man tilted his head to look at her. He wore the remnants of what had been an expensive suit, with gray slacks and button-down blue shirt. Branches pulled these clothes in all directions.

As Mari approached, the man panicked again and thrashed wildly; she could see the thorns catch his skin and break it open, blood on his face and the exposed patches of his arms. Another wave of guilt swept over her.

I should have cut him out sooner.

She sawed the brambles with her stupidly small scissors and plucked thorns from his skin. The man's face was stubbled and raw, and his eyes were wet—his eyes were pieces of sky—and he made a sudden spasming movement; shoving her backwards into the thorns.

She screamed as the thorns clawed through her clothes and into her back.

The man screamed the way the Senseless do—silently, mouth gaping, a wash of saliva flooding his chin.

And he lurched free.

He tottered away, branches trailing from his pants and his shirt.

After the first rescue, when she had to strip a woman who had been caught at the edge of the gardens, Mari attempted to shape each bush with her limited gardening experience. She hacked at the roses with increasingly blunt scissors, trying to regain the sense of beauty and precision which had once been a dependable fixture of the library.

The next day, there had been an older gentleman who stood patiently, docile as a fawn, while she cut around him. And the day after, a teenager, who whipped her body around and foamed at the mouth like something rabid. She was the youngest Mari had seen so far.

After the teen had fought her rescue attempts, landing several painful whacks on her face, Mari used a small trowel (bought once for an ambitious gardening display) in a desperate attempt to dig out the rose bushes. She couldn't hack through the dense network of root and vine.

She was tired, so tired. Every part of her felt bruised and torn; her head pounded at the temples and her back was on fire. She was sick of these rescues, sick of cutting the Senseless loose from this hellish snare of thorns, sick of their primitive fear jumping out at her like a wild animal.

Mari struggled from the bushes and stumbled back inside the library to collect the tools needed to exact her final solution, as the Senseless wandered in aimless circles. She doused the bushes with flammable liquids—everything she could find in her foraging, all the acetic hair spray, hand sanitizer, nail polish remover—and set fire to the first bush. Thick black smoke appeared and she choked on the acrid smell, like foul incense, pouring into her lungs. A rose, the size of her hand, burned like paper. As the flames spread to each rose bush, and the dense undergrowth of vines and grasses, she envisioned the library burning like wildfire. Closing her eyes, feeling the heat against her face, she almost wished it would

happen. Mari could see the books she had fought so hard to protect imploding like little suns. She and the Senseless, human torches, running in the dark.

No more traps. No more fear.

The smoke swirled around her. She cried out when she felt something brush against her and whirled around. Janice looked back at her and sat abruptly in the dirt, too close to the flames. The fire lit her empty face.

Mari grabbed Janice under her scrawny arms and dragged her to the library steps. They sat together and watched the fire rise in waves. Things burst with loud pops. Covered in dirt and sweat, her head split open and bleeding, Mari watched the approaching inferno.

And she waited.