

The Good Man

Adalie thought to herself wondering what defines a curse. At ten years old she had a hard time grasping the concept of a curse. What she knew she only found out through her father's stories and the Disney movies her parents would show her. She thought of Elsa in the ice movie Frozen. She thought she was cursed but towards the end, through the power of sisterhood, she gained control over that power. In the end she wasn't cursed at all, or at least that how Adalie thought of it. Being an only child Adalie didn't think sisterhood would solve her problems. She supposed she'd still have to think about it more. The forest around her was vast and she thought how big the world must be to hold it in place. She held onto her mother's shirt as their tour group stopped at a mighty red wood tree.

"All right now. We'll rest here. This is a great time to sit and rehydrate." The tour lady said with a wide beige brimmed hat. She stuck out her hand as she looked at the watch that rested on her wrist. "Ten minutes and then we'll continue on." She said as she retreated to the back of the group looking for anyone who may have fallen behind.

Adalie looked behind her searching for a familiar face. When she didn't find it, she turned to her mother who was leaning against the red wood tree. Her short red hair stuck to her temples as the beads of sweat dropped off her chin. Her hands rested on her knees and she closed her eyes breathing in slowly through her mouth and out her nose. Her grey sleeveless shirt was baggy on her slim form and tucked into her green shorts. Dark sweat circles were formed under her armpits and Adalie made a mental note to remind her mother that there's more deodorant in the camel pack she carried.

“Mom, where dad?” Adalie said reaching for the tube that connected to the camel pack. She sucked on the tube and cold water filled her mouth. She closed her eyes for a moment and realized just how thirsty she was.

“Oh honey, I don’t know. He’s probably just in the back of the group again. I’m sure he’ll find his way to us.” Her mother said reaching for the tube. Her fingers brushed Adalie’s and she jerked her hand away. She gave Adalie an annoyed look as she drank from the tube.

“I’m sorry baby.” She said before placing the tube in her mouth. The touch still lingered in Adalie’s hand. It was like swimming in a pool that wasn’t yours. Her mother’s feelings of exhaustion and thirst filled Adalie’s chest until there was no more of Adalie left. She took the tube from her mother’s hand and drank until she could feel the water turning in her belly. She placed a hand on the tree as her legs nearly gave out underneath her. She regained her balance before her mother noticed. There was never a time that Adalie could remember not having this empathy. She once overheard her parents watching some therapist on tv late at night. They were talking about the strange connection to one might have to another’s emotions and how it can be overwhelming. That other people’s emotions can affect the empathetic individual. Adalie wasn’t confident that she suffers from severe empathy, but it was the closest she’s ever been to a diagnosis.

Empathy had denied her any kind of human contact. She couldn’t hear the thoughts of those she touched but she took on their exact feelings at the moment of connection. She seemed to take on the personality of the person she touched and without meaning to she couldn’t, or at least not yet, control her actions for a period of time. This forced Adalie to mature faster than most ten-year old’s and she knew that because she had a hard time relating to those her own age.

“Adalie.” Her mother’s voice firm. “You could’ve asked me before snatching the tube from my hand. I would’ve given it to you baby.” She said gentler this time. Adalie still clutched the tube in her hand and released it slowly as she felt more like herself again. Her belly hurt from drinking too much.

“I’m sorry mom. I was just really thirsty. Here.” She said holding her the tube out to her mother. “You’re thirstier than I am.”

Her mother took the tube and drank for a while. Adalie heard footsteps behind her and when she turned around, she found her father there. He was wearing the same beige hat as her mother. His shirt also had large sweat rings under his arms but there was also a big one around his neck that reached to the middle of his chest. He squinted his eyes as he sat next to her mother as he held onto the tube of his camel pack take long sips.

“God. Whose idea was this again?” He asked looking at her mother.

“We thought it would be good for the environment. I think I’ll stick to recycling.” Her mother said with a sigh. He smiled and then looked at Adalie still squinting against the sun.

“Hey Petal. You doing ok? Do you need daddy to carry you?” He asked.

A small panic rose inside Adalie. While she’d love to be carried especially by her dad, she was scared of who she’d become with the contact. Her friends at school would tell her how they’d pretend to be asleep so that their parents would carry them to bed. Only once did this happen with Adalie. She wasn’t paying attention to herself when the program on the tv ended. She remembered feeling weightless. A sense of safety and love washed over her as she snuggled in the crook of her father neck as he carried her to bed. Like a slow moving river, a feeling of hopelessness overcame her as her eyes fluttered open. An emptiness filled her up all the way to her fingertips. She seemed to overflow in darkness and fear crept into her heart as it took over.

She wailed in her father's arms screaming how she needed to get out. She flailed her arms until her father released her. She ran to the front door opening it knowing without knowing that she needed to get out of the house. Once she reached the front yard she stood and closed her eyes. As the cool night air breathed Adalie to herself again. She opened her eyes and found her father staring at her. His eyes unsure of what he had just witnessed from his daughter. As she stared back, she couldn't name what she had felt. It was something she'd not experienced before.

"I'm sorry dad. I was having a bad dream." Adalie said trying to soothe her father's demeanor.

"Some dream Petal. Are you sure you're ok?" He asked walking towards her.

"I'm ok now. I don't even remember it." Adalie said walking around her fathers outstretched hand. She could hear her father come in after her, locking the door behind him. As she heard the click, she placed the feeling she felt. Trapped. She had an unbearable urge to get out. She felt that sometimes but in small ways. Like when Mrs. Beck at school kept teaching when it was recess time. Or when mom and dad watched her eat all the broccoli on her plate for hours before she could leave the table. This emotion was like that except her little body couldn't contain how strong the feeling was. It burst inside her like a popped balloon leaving no room for anything that made Adalie little girl. Her father walked her to her room said good night and left the door open. He told her with concern that she could come and get him if she needed anything in the night. As he retreated Adalie was left with a throbbing in her chest from the balloon pop and a residual sense of imprisonment that kept her up for most of the night. The memory played in her mind like a movie making it hard to be in the present. She saw her father's hand wave in front of her face as her eyes adjusted back from her empty stare.

“Petal. You need more water. Here take some of mine.” Her father held out the tube and Adalie felt bile rise in her throat at the thought of drinking. She swallowed the urge and smiled at her father.

“I’m fine dad. I just need to sit for a bit. I can walk just fine.” She said as she sat cross legged in front of her parents. Her father nodded and placed the tube back on the strap. Adalie’s mother pushed herself from the tree and sat while her father’s arm rested on her leg. Her mother pushed his arm off while she fanned herself with her hand.

“We’re almost to the end of the hike. We’ll be back in the air-conditioned car in no time.” He said raising his eyebrows at her as she returned the gesture.

“I’m fine. Really. I’ve enjoyed this hike. I’ve never seen trees so big in my life. It’s like a world from one of your stories.” Adalie said marveling at the great red wood her parents were resting on. She had to strain her head all the way up and she still couldn’t see the top of the tree. Most nights her father would tuck her into bed with a story. He was a first generation American with his parents being from Russia. He grew up with stories of the brutal winter storms and night terrors. Those were always Adalie’s favorite. His stories made Adalie feel as if there was another world. Somewhere deep in the woods lived a monster of unimaginable horror and the heroes must save the day. Unlike all the Disney movies she watched, her father’s stories rarely had a happy ending. It never bothered Adalie that her dad had bleak life lessons in his stories. Children who didn’t listen to their parents were gobbled up and greed left people without limbs. More than often she relied on them when her empathy seemed too much for her. It reminded her that there was always something worse that lingered in the woods. Adalie thought she’d like to visit one day and see if the stories were real.

“It is isn’t it. Maybe we’ll see a Fairy along the way.” Her father said as he smiled. “I mean unless you’ve already seen one.” He lowered his voice as if he were revealing a great secret.

“I can’t tell you if I did.” Adalie said rolling her eyes as she played along. “Remember it’s bad luck.” She said her voice a soft whisper. She crossed her arms as he stared her down with his green eyes narrowed.

The tour lady blew a whistle then and people started to pick themselves off the forest floor. Adalie’s mother released a sigh and she pushed herself off the tree.

“Oh right. See, you’re already smarter than me” He said standing up. Adalie chuckled, did the same and followed him. He turned around suddenly and Adalie almost bumped into him. She took an extra step back as he placed his hands on his knees bending over to be at eye level with her.

“Why do I call you Petal?” His voice was smooth and carried the weight of fatherhood. He had always called her Petal for as long as Adalie could remember. Instead of saying “I love you” to each other they had their own way of saying it.

“Because I was a sun drop that turned into a sunflower.” Adalie said holding her hand to her cheek a little embarrassed. It wasn’t often her father asked that question, but it usually wasn’t around so many people. He winked at her and stood up straight.

“Don’t ever forget that.” He said not much louder than a whisper. She wasn’t sure if she was supposed to hear him. She stayed silent and walked alongside him as the tour group progressed. The more miles they walked the more her father lagged behind. Soon it was only her mother that she could see in the crowd of unfamiliar faces. Adalie kept looking behind her trying to find her father’s face. At first, she’d catch glimpses and he’d wave at her, letting her know he

was still there. After a while she couldn't find him at all. It bothered her that her father disappeared behind the trees. She knew it was irrational, but she didn't want him to be lost. She quickened her pace to catch up with her mother.

"Can we wait for dad?" Adalie said pleading. Her mother stopped walking and searched the crowd. She sighed and stretched on her tiptoes as if it would help her see better.

"Sure, baby." She said with a forced smile. "How about when dad catches up you can walk with him. That way you won't be so worried."

"That would make me feel better." Adalie said nodding to her. She wiped some sweat from her forehead and searched the crowd. She felt her mother's hand on her cheek as she turned her head back towards her. It was a gentle touch and she caressed Adalie's brown bangs from her sticky forehead.

"Your heart is so big Adalie. I wonder how it fits in your little body." She said as her eyes sparkled. Adalie's chest filled with wonder and awe. It was as if her mother's face was lit itself and she thought she could detect a faint glow. Adalie's eyes watered and she couldn't help but smile as wide as she could. As the feeling filled her Adalie knew with absolute assurance that her mother loved her. She wondered how her mother didn't burst from all the love inside her. Her mother's head turned from her to look at her father approaching. She withdrew her hand but not before Adalie detected something. The sounds of the forest silenced, the sun's heat left her cold and she found herself in a blurred world of the faded figures around her. Absence. Absolute absence of emotion. Adalie's heart slowed and her chest ached with the effort of every breath. She felt a black hole in her, voided of everything and wondered again for her mother. How did she not die from this consuming nothingness?

“Help me.” Adalie whispered not speaking for herself. The feeling faded and Adalie looked up at her parents hoping they didn’t hear her. They talked with each other seeming to not notice Adalie’s trance. The world in slow motion started to piece itself back together. The sounds around her returned and her sight cleared.

“-last vacation together. Spend time with her.” She heard her mother say in the same tone she’d use when Adalie was in trouble. She saw her father furrow his eyebrows and line his lips with a worried frown. Her mother glanced at Adalie and blew her a kiss before walking ahead towards the front of the tour group.

“All right Petal. I’ve claimed you and now you’re stuck with me.” He said with a step in his voice. The frown he had earlier disappeared as if he had never had it. He looked ahead with a determination in his eyes as if he were to journey on a quest. Adalie smiled grateful for the change of mood from when her mother touched her. They walked in silence for a while taking in the beauty of nature surrounding them. Adalie’s neck hurt from how much she was looking up at the red wood trees. She so badly wanted to see the top of one that she continued to strain her neck as high as she could. Eventually she gave up and tried to spot the different wildlife around her. Her father would notice some squirrels and pointed them out to her. In the far distance Adalie was sure she spotted a bobcat but as soon as she pulled on her father’s camel pack to show him the animal had slipped silently into the forest.

They were at the very back of the group but Adalie didn’t mind. She searched in her chest and found only herself. She breathed in and found that if that was all she ever was it would be enough. She didn’t know what to do with the empathy, but she knew she had to live with it. She wondered if she might be able to control it at some point. Maybe she could close herself off to emotions that were too strong. Those scared her. Every time she had an episode, she was more

and more terrified of losing herself. She was just a little girl. She wasn't supposed to know who she was. She was supposed to climb on the monkey bars and play tag. She was supposed to kiss her parent's goodnight. The place she imagined was an island. She was alone with the shadow of her alter. It shaped into whomever she touched. The blackness would lift from the floor and envelop her. Suffocating her until all that was left was the shadow and Adalie had to fight her way back until it returned to the ground. It left patches of darkness on her skin, like blank pages in a book. Piece by piece the shadow took more and less of Adalie returned.

"Petal. Look at this." Her father said his voice pitched in excitement. Adalie broke from her wandering thoughts and looked at her father. In his hand he held a small stone the size of Adalies palm. It was smooth and grey speckled with white dots that looked like freckles.

"Oh, it's so pretty." Adalie said admiring the stone. She picked it up from her father's palm carefully not to touch him directly. The stone was cold in her hand and she ran her fingers over the smooth surface looking for imperfections. There were none. It was a perfectly round rock that begged to be skipped on a river.

"I have a story for you if you'd like to hear it." He said. Adalie was surprised. He'd never told her a story outside of bedtime. She smiled and bounced on the balls of her feet in excitement.

"Really? I'd love to hear it." She said eager for a new adventure. "Is it new?" She asked.

"I haven't told you think one yet. My mom told me when when I was a little older than you but you're stronger than me. You can handle everything I can't." He said looking at her as if she were the most beautiful sunflower in the world. She nodded smiling wide and they continued to walk side by side at the back of the group.

“In a time where time did not exist there was a man. A very good man. In his pocket he held a pouch of coins. Only three pieces he had.” He said holding out three of his fingers. “One for the ring to buy his lady’s love, one for the wood to build his home, and one for the stone to mark his grave. This was all he had and all he ever wanted. The man liked to go for walks in the woods. Now these woods were special they held all types of mystical creatures.”

“Did they have centaurs?” Adalie said. She glanced into the woods as if she expected to see one riding out to greet them. Her father smiled and shook his head.

“No. The forest was too dark for them. There were fairies though. They were beautiful with delicate blue wings. They’re hands were the size of your pinky nail.” He wiggled his pinkie in the air as if it were flying. She laughed as his deep voice continued with the story. “This good man spoke with the fairies of the forest. Now the important thing to remember about fairies is-”

“If you ever speak of them back luck will follow.” Adalie finished. It was a common rule in most of his stories.

“Right you are Petal. The man knew this and never once spoke of the things he saw. The only other rule when entering the forest was you never take anything. It was commonly known that the fairy’s bad luck will follow whomever took even a single snowflake.” He pinched his pointer finger and thumb together emphasizing the size. “He kept his promises and followed the rules of the land. A good man, like I said. When the day came, he was to buy the ring for his lady’s love he took a walk in the woods. The air was cold, and the woods were as still as they had ever been. He knew this would be his last visit since he would not be able to take his new bride. He wanted to say farewell to his friends of the forest. Fairies can be fickle creatures. If one were ever to cross your path you must take great care in what they say. Their greatest skill is their ability to tell a lie by telling the truth. The little creatures view humans as playthings to be

experimented on. They hold no malice, but they harbor no mercy. They are simply magic and magic is-” he paused pursing his lips. “impartial in the affairs of the human realm.” Adalie nodded understanding.

“Deep in the woods he found his fairies. They flew and soared around the trees dancing in the wind. It was truly a sight to behold. He felt sad knowing he wouldn’t ever come back. They asked the good man what he carried. He showed them his pouch of coins and told them of the ring, wood and stone. They fluttered around him prettier than summer butterflies. One of the fairies carried a rock. It was smooth and encrusted with white swirling patterns that changed shape. The man held out his hand and the fairy placed the rock there. They told him it was a memory to take. The good man knew the rules of the forest and tried to give it back to the fairy. He told them he could not have their bad luck follow him. The fairies said that he would have all the wishes he entered with. He touched the pouch that held his coins and asked if they were true in their word. They flew into the sky answering him in their flight whispering yes before disappearing into the frost. The man clutched the magic rock and put it in the pouch with his coins.”

“The man should not have trusted the fairies. They did promise him though.” Adalie said unsure of how the story would end. She listened to the crack of the leaves beneath her shoes, pondering the effects of the man’s decision.

“So, the good man wandered towards the edge of the forest. He walked, and he walked, and he walked. He walked for so long that the forest became thicker. Pushing him further and further in until the ground was all root and the branches enveloped the sky like a webbed canopy.” Her father raised his hands to the sky pointing at the branches above them. Adalie looked up and thought of how amazing it would be to see a sky of branches. “He realized he was

lost and called out for help. The night was cold, and he could find no shelter. Suddenly a face appeared behind a tree.” He paused as Adalie released a quiet gasp. She closed her mouth and looked at her father. Her eyes were filled with curiosity and they begged her father to continue. His shoulders slumped and his voice quieted as he looked outward towards the woods. “Then another and another. Soon the good man was surrounded by men, women and children. They were the Watchers of the forest, those who left the world of humans for magic. They enforce the laws set by the fairies. No malice and no mercy. They seized the good man and led him to a tree where they tied his hands and feet. A Watcher with no eyes took the pouch from the man’s belt. He pulled out the three coins and swallowed them. He placed the rock back in the pouch and tied it to the good man’s belt.”

“Why would he swallow the coins?” Adalie said confused.

“You know Petal. I don’t know. I wonder myself.” He shrugged. “But he swallowed them all the same. The good man tried to tell them they could keep the rock. He knew it was because he kept the fairies rock, but they would not talk with him. Many did not have mouths with which to speak. Since time did not exist there is no telling how long they kept him tied to the tree. Winter didn’t end and the snow fall covered the rooted ground in white dust. Finally, they took him from the tree to another that twisted in unnatural angles. The roots curled and formed a platform with uneven steps to climb upon. Up high just above was a thick black branch where a noose hung. The good man begged with the Watchers. They could not listen for most had no ears. He wept as they led him up the stairs and he didn’t notice a coin on warped steps. They slipped the noose around his neck and shivering he didn’t see another coin at feet. When they lowered his pale body in between the roots in frozen ground he couldn’t feel the coldness of the

last coin clutch in his hand. He is buried there somewhere in the woods with the white patterned rock in his pouch.”

Adalie was silent for a moment. Her fingers shook as she clutched the white spotted rock in her hand. “I don’t understand. How did he get everything he wished? They killed him.” Adalie said. She didn’t want to admit she was frightened but the slight tremble in her voice surprised her as she had never been afraid of her father’s stories before. She quickly composed herself so her father wouldn’t see the fear that loomed over her like the branched sky.

“Good people make mistakes. Even if they don’t know it. The noose was the ring, the wood the gallows, and the rock his grave marker. The story is a warning to take care in the meaning of what others say. That good people, the good man, can make honest mistakes that have consequences.” Her father stopped walking and faced Adalie. He was a big man and not just because Adalie was a little girl. His whole being was large. His eyes, hands, legs, smile, and voice out shadowed everybody Adalie knew. She wondered how her father ever thought she was stronger than him. Nothing was stronger than her father and she loved him dearly for it.

“Keep it.” Her father said nodding his chin at the stone. Adalie’s eyes widened and she shook her head as a her spine tingled against the feel of the stone.

“Why not? It’s a pretty stone like you said and it’ll be memory to keep for this place.” He said as he raised his hands gesturing to the tall trees around them.

“What about the good man?” Adalie lifted her chin to look at her father. “The good man took a rock from the forest. The forest killed him for it.” Adalie said staring at the stone. Her father bent his knees in a crouch and Adalie looked at him. His face was unreadable. A wall of neutrality. He picked the stone from her hand and threw it up in the air before catching it again.

“You know those stories aren’t real. I’m sorry that I frightened you.” He said. Adalie jerked her chin up in protest.

“I wasn’t scared.” She said feigning bravery. “I just want to be careful is all.”

This stone-” He paused holding the stone in his hand towards her with his palm up. “-is nothing but a memory. Something to take with you and treasure for when you get older.” He looked down at the ground as if he expressed something he didn’t want Adalie to see. “I want you to have this memory. Keep it.” He said in a soft tone still holding the stone. Adalie reached out and held it in her hand. She looked at her father who bit his lip and looked to be fighting tears. She wondered why he was so sad. She almost reached out to hold his hand until she thought better of it.

“I will.” Adalie said with her back straightened as if she had taken an oath. Her father stood and smiled the sadness gone from his demeanor but rested in his eyes.

“Why do I call you Petal?” He said

“I was a sun drop that turned into a sunflower.” She said completing the ritual. He ran a hand through his sweaty hair and placed his hands on his hips.

“My own little sunflower.” He said smiling. “You know that daddy loves you right? That’s there’s nothing in this world that would ever keep me from being your daddy?” He said not really asking. She answered anyways.

“I know dad. Are you ok?” Adalie frowned and worried at his strange change of behavior.

“I’m alright Petal. Just tired. Your old daddy is just being silly. Come on, let’s catch up. Or we’ll be stuck in these woods and daddy wasn’t a Boy Scout.” He laughed and walked ahead. Adalie watch him for a moment trying to place the puzzle of their conversation together.

“Adalie. Come along.” Her father yelled. She discarded the pieces of the puzzle in her mind, put the stone in her pocket and raced to her father’s side. They came to the end of the trail and the group was gathered around a sign that said *Parking Lot B* with an arrow pointing to the side.

“This is the first lot. Those of you parked here can follow this trail and in about five minutes you’ll reach your vehicles.” She pointed in the direction that the arrow was facing. She found her mother’s face in the group. She saw them and waved her hand over in the direction of the trail. Adalie and her father walked over to her.

“This is where we parked. Let’s go so we can get into something that’s air conditioned.” She said panting. They walked ahead of Adalie while she trailed behind looking at the shrubbery surrounding the path. Her parents were whispering to each other. She could only make out a few fractured sentences like “-I can’t.”, “-don’t make me.” And “-won’t understand.” She fingered the stone in her pocket wondering to herself if she should take it out and drop it on the mossy ground. She knew her father would be disappointed, but he wouldn’t be angry she thought. It was a silly superstition and while she enjoyed her father’s dark stories this one was one she didn’t want to test. She stopped in the path and walked to the edge of the trail, lifting a skinny branch so it wouldn’t tangle in her hair. She took out the stone and stared at its freckled surface. Its dark color reminded Adalie of the shadow that embodied her image of what she felt when touching people. She tipped her hand slowly as if dropping it would crack the stone and whatever bad luck it held would attach itself to Adalie. It slid on her palm as half of the stone teetered on her hand. Balancing itself as if it didn’t want to leave her possession. She decided her memory would be intact without the stone. Just as she was about to drop it she felt two hands grip her shoulders. Instinct flooded her and she clutched the stone to her chest ready to throw it.

“Adalie.” Her mother said panicked. “We were calling for you baby. Why didn’t you answer? You can’t wander like that. You’ll get lost.” Her mother gripped Adalie’s shoulders tight.

“Your mother is right, Petal. You scared us both.” Her father said his hand on her head.

“Of course, I’m right.” Her mother snapped at him. She took Adalie’s hand in hers and her father did the same. They led her back on the trail while gripping her hands tightly in theirs. Adalie walked and walked and walked. She forgot the trail, forgot the stone still clasped in her hand. She stared ahead into the forest with her expression blank as the shadow took over. Like electricity flowing through her arm she felt her mother’s fear. Unbridled it seeped into her veins like a poison. So much fear. It crawled up her arm until it reached her chest. She felt the fear of loneliness, of being utterly alone. The color of it was black and it infected everything inside of Adalie. The blackness was met with her father’s feeling. Abandonment. It flowed through her like tar, thick and consuming. It hardened inside her and when the two met it ripped in her chest leaving a bloody massacre that left her breathless. The emotions tore at each other fighting for dominance. Trampling over Adalie like a bug in the ground leaving her screaming in her head.

Adalie didn’t realize they reached the parking lot. She stared into oblivion as her parents released her hands to pack up their hiking supplies in the trunk of the car. She felt the wind brushing her face and the gravel under her shoes, but it was as if it were happening to someone else. She was a vessel occupied by a foreign being forcing her into the air helpless as the shadow spread through her. Her father was leaving. She knew it. He was abandoning her, and she knew it. She reached into her pocket and took out the stone. Her father was behind her mother waiting for his turn to put away his camel pack. Adalie stood behind him the shadow compelling her to give in.

“No malice, no mercy.” She whispered as she placed the stone in her father’s pack.